



the Atlantic

BY MARK BOWDEN

**THE
END
OF
WHITE
AMERICA?**

BY HUA HSU

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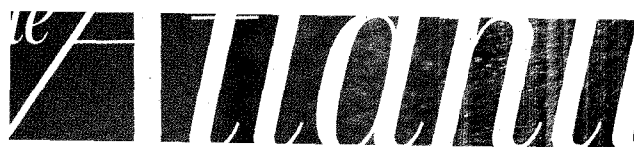


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LOST IN AN INFORMATION FOG



A huge problem for American health care is that the current information non-system lacks accuracy, availability, and connectivity.

Patient information is almost always locked into inaccessible, often inaccurate, totally unlinked paper medical records. Those paper medical records are inert—not interactive—so care for individual patients is often based on incomplete and flawed information and care for populations of patients is untracked, unrecorded, and far too often collectively unaccountable.

- No process data
- Tiny levels of outcomes data
- Minimal operating data
- Rare or non-exist data linkages

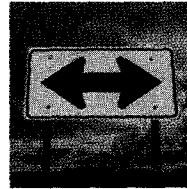
It's very hard to know what's going on in health care and even harder to make things better with extremely weak data.

CARE OUTCOMES ARE FAR FROM WHERE THEY OUGHT TO BE

Studies done by multiple evaluation processes show a massive inconsistency in care delivery and care quality in America.

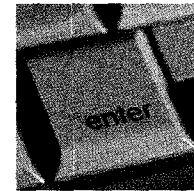
The Rand Studies, Institute of Medicine Reports, Dartmouth Reports, and the Commonwealth Fund research all show a huge gap between optimal care and the care most patients receive. The Rand analysis showed that barely 50 percent of Americans are receiving the right care most of the time.

With absolutely no current and complete data about care, we don't even know as



a country which 50 percent are getting right care and which 50 percent are getting wrong care. That's wrong.

ALL OF THE INFORMATION FOR ALL OF THE PATIENTS ALL OF THE TIME



We need real data we can improve care. We need that data on a computer. Paper is obsolete. Paper medical records could, and should be, legislated against.

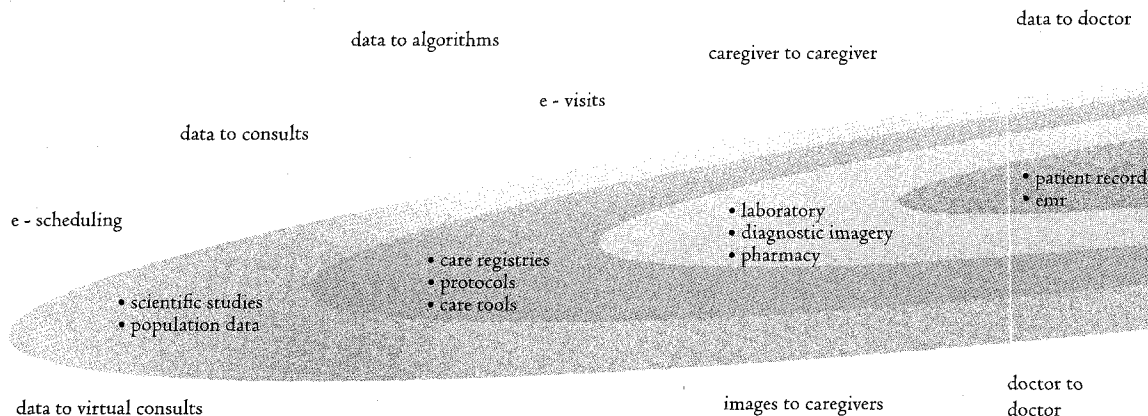
their use applied in emergencies only—and most actual physical emergencies paper records may well end up burned, crushed, flood shredded, or simply blown away.

Every other area of American Industry is now data rich. Only healthcare is data poor so Americans are now spending \$2.3 trillion dollars each year for unmeasured, untracked, unlinked care.

THE FUTURE OF HEALTHCARE INFORMATION IS HEADED TO A BAD PLACE

fig 1: CARE THAT REVOLVES AROUND YOU

Comprehensive data connections to every part of the system: all of the info, about all the patients, all of the time.



REAL-TIME DATA SPECIFIC TO EACH PATIENT

Patients need electronic links to their own doctors and to their own medical information. Patients should be able to do e-scheduling, appointments, e-visits, e-data searches, consults, and e-conversations with their own providers and with care support advisors, experts, gurus and consultants.



All care related systems should be linkable and linked. Digital imaging should be stored electronically, along with prescription data, diagnosis data and care strategy data. Key information for every patient should be available whenever and wherever the doctor and the patient need the data. Real-time care deserves real-time medical information.

Meaningful DNA data that can help treat cancer, diabetes and other diseases, and help doctors with prediction and prevention, should also be in the medical tool kit.

And everywhere data confidentiality should be fully protected.

WE ARE INVESTING FOUR BILLION DOLLARS TO BUILD BRIDGES TO BEST CARE



Kaiser Permanente believes that doctors and other relevant caregivers do their best work with complete information about every patient. We have installed a real-time, constantly available, comprehensive electronic medical record for each of our eight and a half million members.

Our system is far from perfect—and we are learning as we go—but we conducted over three million “e-visits” for patients this year—without patients expending one gallon of gas. We now do more than 160,000 electronic linkages with our members every single day, with lab tests, follow-up notes, prescription filling, e-scheduling, e-advice, and e-visits, all available electronically ...all of the information, about all of the patients, all of the time.

IT TAKES AN ELECTRONIC VILLAGE TO HEAL A NATION

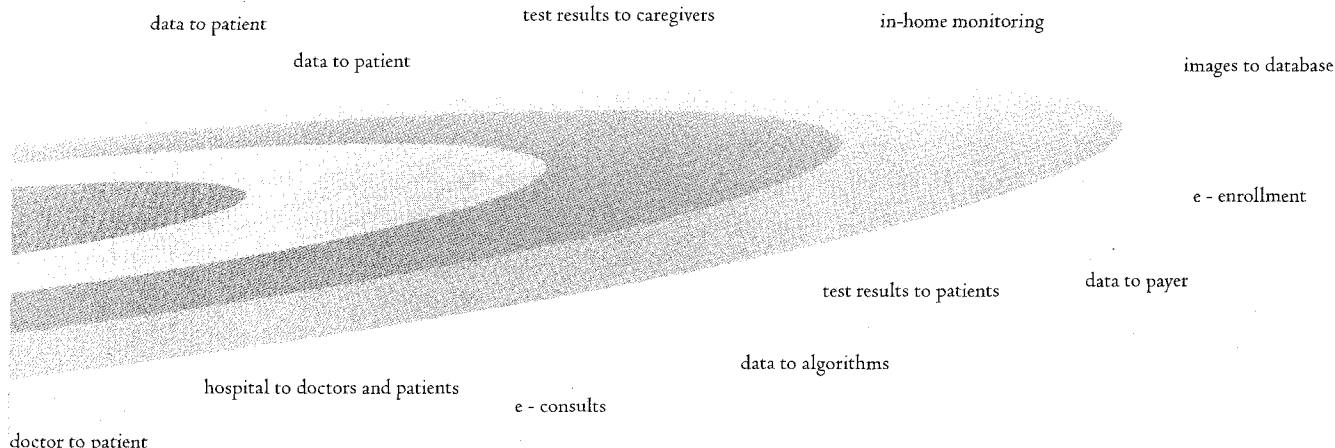
We are just now learning how to use all of those linkages and all of that data. In one Kaiser Permanente pilot, we reduced the rate of heart disease by 40 percent. In another computer supported pilot, we reduced the number of heart disease deaths by over 70 percent. We are far from perfect, but we are committed to figuring out how to be as good as we can be.



We believe everyone in America should be requiring computer supported care. Care registries work. Personal health records help. Several pathways to e-connectivity are possible. Better and readily available electronic care data is very possible for everyone in America. Remember, paper is inadequate.

Go to our website to learn more about the current approaches to computer supported care and how the rest of America can move toward using computers and data to improve care.

UNLESS WE ACT NOW.



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to learn more about the changes healthcare needs, go to kaiserpermanente.org/future

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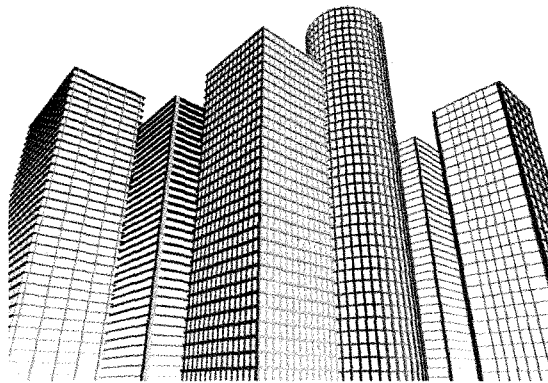
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The Bush Files

Readers are invited to submit mementos—from quotes to videos to books to movies—that best capture the essence of the Bush years.



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Panama Hack

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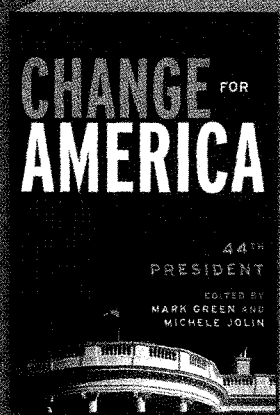
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Breakthrough Leads to Windows That Produce Energy

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — University scientists have developed windows that collect solar energy. A major advancement, the windows use a special coating to absorb sunlight and then re-emit the energy into the glass, which conducts it to solar cells.

'Guerilla Gardeners' Take Initiative to Beautify Urban Areas

LOS ANGELES — People all over the world are reaching for rakes and shovels in an effort to transform neglected public spaces. And they're not waiting for permission from city officials. It's a grassroots movement that's growing. Literally. On any given

Saturday night in cities from L.A. to London, you can find ordinary citizens pulling weeds alongside freeway off-ramps. Or planting flowers in vacant lots. And it's almost always done anonymously. In most cities, getting approval to beautify public property

is nearly impossible. Not because anyone objects to the idea, but because bureaucracy often gets in the way. As a result, "guerilla gardeners" are quietly taking it upon themselves, donating time and resources to help change the face of their neighborhoods.

New Plastics Biodegrade in Just Four Months

ROLLA, Mo. — A team of researchers is creating new types of biodegradable plastic that will help reduce the amount of landfill-clogging waste Americans produce each year. The material, which modifies several bio-based, oil-based and natural polymers, could go a long way toward minimizing the size of landfills. Ultimately, the team hopes to develop a variety of applications for the plastic, including bags, bottles and product packaging.

Pact Protects 2,400 Square Miles of Amazon

GEORGETOWN, Guyana — With the support of a U.S.-based conservation organization, leaders from Guyana's Wai Wai tribe are working to protect their section of the rainforest from commercial loggers. The 2,400-square-mile Wai Wai-controlled section helps make up a vital area called the Guyana Shield, which includes approximately 25 percent of the tropical rainforests left in the world. It's also home to several rare animals, including the jaguar.

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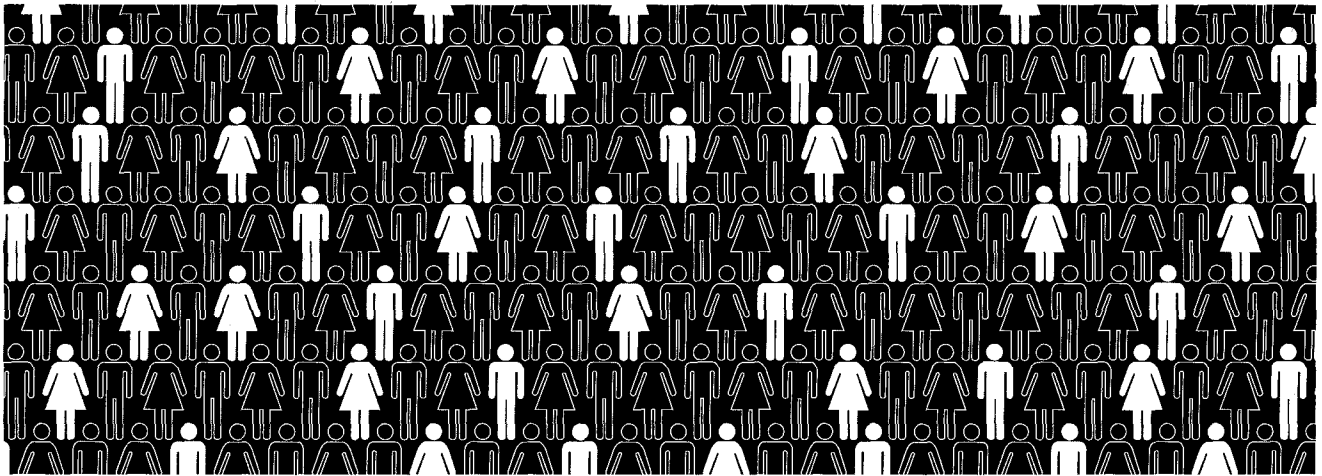
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EDITOR'S NOTE



Are We White?

ONE DAY, WHILE waiting for his mother to finish work at the American Embassy in Jakarta, Barack Obama was flipping through a stack of *Life* magazines when he came across a picture of a man in dark glasses and a raincoat, walking alone. Looking more closely, Obama noticed that the man's skin had a "ghostly hue," as if, he wrote in his memoir, "blood had been drawn from the flesh." The man had gotten a chemical treatment in hopes of lightening his complexion.

Obama describes himself as seized by a novel fear—his stomach knotting, his face growing hot. He was already conscious of himself as black, but this was the first time he realized that his race could be seen as a bad thing, that maybe "something was wrong with me." He was 9 years old—lucky, he wrote, to have had so many years "free from self-doubt," and still certain of the love of his white mother. (Though the man's subtlety is hinted at in the boy's emotional caution: "By the time my mother came to take me home, my face wore a smile and the magazines were back in their proper place.")

For W. E. B. DuBois, both realizations—of his distinction and of its difference—came at once, "in the early days of rollicking boyhood," when in a New England schoolhouse a white girl rejected a gift he had offered. "Then

it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness," he wrote in these pages in 1897, "that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil."

For white Americans, consciousness of race has tended to arrive without quite so much freight—as a discovery that there are distinctions, sure, but that white is the norm, the default mode for humanity. This may be changing. It was probably no coincidence that on the day Americans elected Obama president, our 4-year-old son looked up at my wife and asked, "Are we white?" (We are.)

In focusing our annual State of the Union issue on race, we didn't want simply to celebrate the inauguration of America's first black president; nor did we want to rain on a parade many of us feared we'd never see. But we did want to complicate things a little, since it seems to us that in America, no real conversation about race can be glib.

As Marc Ambinder shows in his article "Race Over?," the Obama campaign did not so much transcend race as manage to talk around it. The campaign's success at neutralizing white suspicion while capitalizing on black solidarity underscores the magnitude of its political accomplishment, and the

treacherousness, and potential richness, of the social terrain ahead.

For as Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in "American Girl," blacks accustomed to leaders who style themselves as America's conscience, rather than its decision makers—and also to viewing their countrymen through "the DuBoisian veil, the dark filter"—will now watch a black first family at the very center of American life. And now whites, as Hua Hsu writes in "The End of White America?," are confronted with their own impending minority status, with its attendant, explicit race consciousness and grievance-driven identity politics. How will they respond over time to a black president?

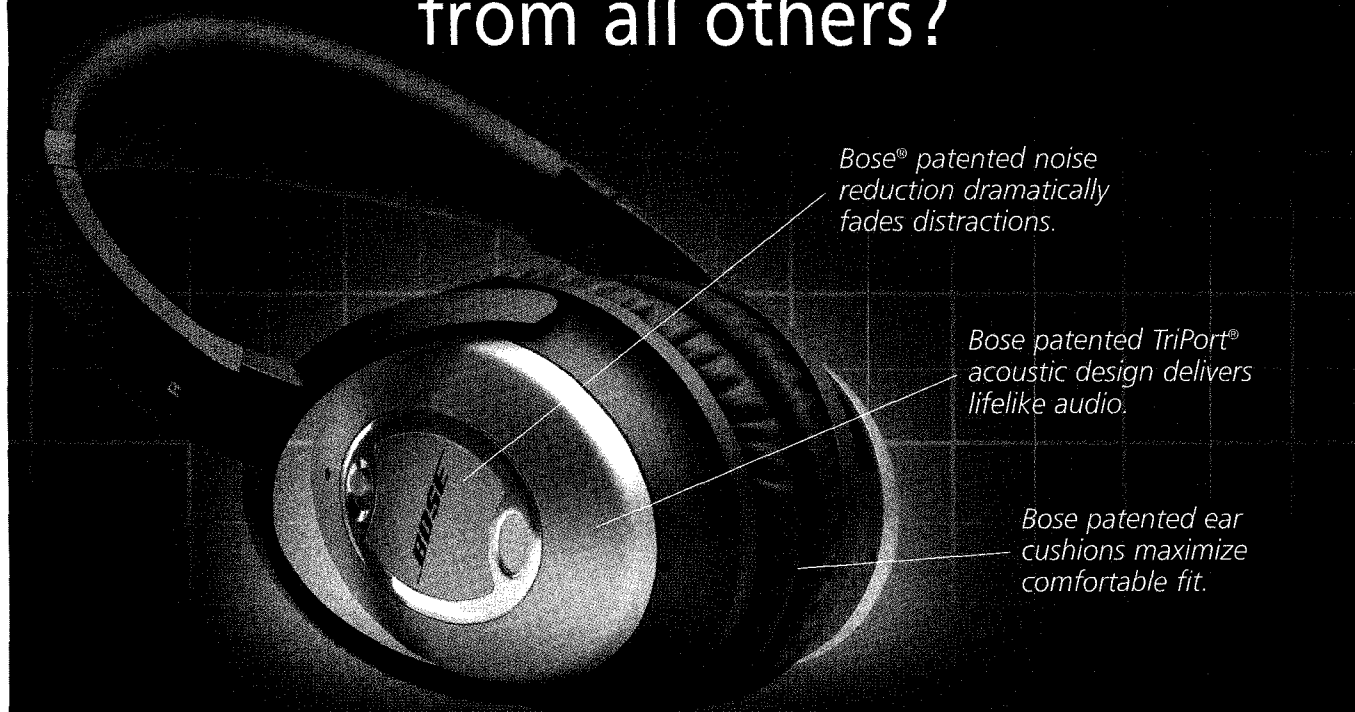
Given the state of the union more generally, it's a lot to ask of Barack Obama to also fulfill our hopes, and assuage our fears, about race. The good news is that if he governs well, the rest will surely follow. Beyond the competence of his transition, his careful study of his racial identity offers further reason for optimism. Far more than the white man who

preceded him in office—who not only passed through childhood but reached the Oval Office evidently free from self-doubt—the new American president has deep reason to hate government's abuse, and to respect its potential.

—James Bennet

**Now whites
are confronted
with minority
status, and the
grievance-driven
politics that
comes with it.**

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that make it so enjoyable. And our patented TriPort acoustic design enables a level of lifelike performance that has made Bose the most respected name in sound. *Travel + Leisure Golf* explains, "Forget 'concertlike' comparisons; you'll think you're onstage with the band." Or just unplug the audio cord and relax as Bose noise reduction envelops you in tranquility.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



SECURITY THEATER

Jeffrey Goldberg ("The Things He Carried," November *Atlantic*) misses a most obvious component to why he was able to successfully pass through airport security whilst faking sweat, having no ID, using a phony boarding pass, and wearing an Osama bin Laden T-shirt: his race. Goldberg neglects to mention that a "smart terrorist" is better off using the ultimate weapon against the Transportation Security Administration: a white guy as the mule. Try all those things Goldberg did as a person of color, and I guarantee a different outcome.

MAYA LAU
BROOKLYN, N.Y.

TSA, like any bureaucracy, is not perfect, but, as a former transportation security officer, I was impressed by the professionalism shown by my colleagues and the Washington office. The vast majority of passengers understand the necessity of screening and cooperate accordingly. I quickly learned that a smile and a "thank you" go a long way in making the process go smoothly for all concerned. TSA must constantly evaluate and refine its procedures and adapt them to meet new potential threats. It also must work with a physical plant that in many cases is not well suited for maximum screening effectiveness. Since the agency's inception, millions of passengers have flown without incident from the 450 airports staffed by TSA personnel. I think this speaks for itself. Finally, I would note that TSA personnel definitely do not, as Mr. Goldberg implies, retain Leatherman tools and other confiscated items.

JAMES E. SCHEFFLER
DES MOINES, IOWA

Jeffrey Goldberg replies:

Maya Lau's point is mostly unsupported by the facts. I am no defender of the TSA, quite obviously, but the agency is fairly rigorous on the matter of racial profiling. Complaints about racial profiling are comparatively few, and TSA doctrine, which reflects standard American counterterrorism doctrine, assumes that al-Qaeda actively tries to recruit white people to commit anti-American violence. Anecdotally, I've watched hundreds of white people undergo secondary screenings at numerous American airports. I have no doubt that problems remain, but from what I've observed, the TSA is an equal-opportunity irritator.

James E. Scheffler's defense of his TSA colleagues is admirable, though again, not grounded entirely in fact. TSA employees have been caught stealing; recently, a TSA baggage screener was arrested at the Newark airport after allegedly taking 66 cameras and 31 laptops from passenger luggage.

DARN IT

Steven Pinker ("Freedom's Curse," November *Atlantic*) uses *curse* and *swear* in their everyday senses, to apply to all taboo vocabulary, but it is useful to draw some distinctions. More narrowly, "swearing" and "cursing" are typically "profanities," which is to say, violations of religious taboos. Swearing is now pretty rare (*I swear to God!*), though it used to be more common (in

Falstaffian oaths such as 'Sblood!—"by God's blood"—or *Zounds!*—"by God's wounds"). Most of Pinker's examples are "obscenities"—taboo words associated with various sexual and excretory functions. Pinker also mentions the infamous N word, which is a racial "slur."

Nearly all of us—including George Carlin and Pinker's colleagues at Har-

vard—are offended by violations of some kinds of linguistic taboos. Political conservatives tend to be more offended by profanities and obscenities, whereas liberals tend to be more offended by racial and ethnic slurs as well as by slurs against homosexuals. Pinker says that words are arbitrary labels and that linguistic taboos embody a kind of magical misconception about language. In fact, though, speakers within a linguistic community typically show widespread agreement about the rela-

tive offensiveness of words. Linguistic taboos are real, then, not magical.

GILBERT YOUNG
EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI
COLUMBIA, MO.

Steven Pinker replies:

One of the many odd features of taboo language is that we have no precise English word for it, only euphemisms, as if the act of using such language was as loathsome as the things and actions it refers to. We talk of swearing and oaths (promises), curses (damnation), vulgarity

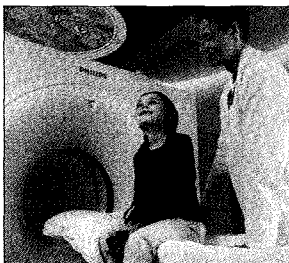
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THE THINGS
THEY CARRIED ...

Readers responding to Jeffrey Goldberg's November article on airport security shared that they had carried the following items on board (with or without raising an eyebrow):

1. semiautomatic pistol
2. powdered tungsten to make a bomb
3. bowling ball
4. Swiss Army knife
5. ziplock bag of frozen spaghetti

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and profanity (the secular or common), epithets (names), expletives (fillers), blasphemy (insulting God), and obscenity and indecency (considerable overstatements when it comes to muttering "Shit!" after dropping a pencil). Racial slurs are not embraced by any of these words, yet psychologically they work the same way.

Linguistic taboos are certainly real in the sense of being a quirk of our psychology. But surely no one today believes that an incantation can send someone to hell, that an eavesdropping God will punish anyone who impiously invokes him, or that hearing certain words will corrupt a child's morals. Yet intuitions of this kind must be what drives bureaucrats and lawmakers to feel they are entitled to restrict certain words, in defiance of all logic and the principle of freedom of speech.

SCHOOLS MAVEN

The profile of D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee ("The Lightning Rod," November *Atlantic*) left readers with the mistaken impression that she and other leaders must make a false choice between quality teachers and "extras." The Economic Policy Institute report mentioned in the piece was titled "A Broader, Bolder Approach" because it recognized that we need to change the odds so all children can successfully achieve. Any school superintendent—whether in Washington, D.C., or Washington, North Carolina—needs to recognize that there is only so much a quality teacher, adequate classroom supplies, and caring administrators can accomplish.

I write this as the former U.S. assistant secretary of primary and secondary education who was charged with implementation of No Child Left Behind. Yes, we must have quality teachers and accountability. But they will take us only so far. Students also need high-quality early-childhood and preschool programs, after-school and summer programs, and programs that develop parents' capacity to support their children's education.

SUSAN B. NEUMAN
PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
ANN ARBOR, MICH.

Clay Risen replies:

While I greatly appreciate Susan B. Neuman's insight, I believe she is missing a critical distinction between education policy and education politics. She is undoubtedly correct that improving teacher quality and improving a student's social milieu are not mutually exclusive, and are both important means to improve student outcomes. However, education policy is not made in a vacuum, and cannot be. This is where so much of education policy breaks down: there is, sadly, a broadening gulf between teacher-quality advocates and those aligned with "A Broader, Bolder Approach." Arguably, the answer lies in a mixture of the two. Whether we can find that answer depends much more on improving our education politics than on improving our education policy.

BOY OR GIRL?

As one of the most vocal activists in the American transgender community, I would like to thank you for investing in this fascinating human-rights issue ("A Boy's Life," November *Atlantic*). However, beginning with your title, your bias shines through. You give great respect to Ken Zucker's ideological beliefs, minimizing the ever-increasing data showing that transsexualism is biological.

I'm fortunate to have survived transition as an adult and to be thriving as the woman I have always been, despite half a century of social ostracism and physical and mental torture at the hands of my medical colleagues. I presented a paper in 2005, with Dr. Milton Diamond, to Dr. Zucker and a host of other experts at the International Behavioral Development Symposium, showing that exposure to DES (diethylstilbestrol) in utero was strongly linked to the onset of the intersexed condition called transsexualism. Recently, another paper was published in the journal *Biological Psychiatry*, positing another biological cause.

Is there research to be done? Of course. We also need better techniques to differentiate between those who are truly transsexual and those who will turn out to be gender variant, yet comfortable in their genital sex, and those who are simply gay. The bottom line, however, is that forcing children through years of misery to placate parents causes immeasurable harm to the gender-variant children. And parents should care, first and foremost, about their children's well-being.

DANA BEYER, M.D.
CHEVY CHASE, MD.

Hanna Rosin replies:

Meeting dozens of transgender kids and adults brought home the point that one cannot overestimate the pain and suffering of people, young and old, who find themselves in this impossible predicament. All of the things Dr. Dana Beyer mentioned, I witnessed or heard about: the social ostracism, the mental and medical torture.

But that alone does not change the psychological or medical reality. There just is very little medical research describing

the condition, and no consensus on how to treat it. Biologists are nowhere near defining it as genetic. Experts differ radically, particularly on how to handle very young children. Dr. Zucker's approach may infuriate Dr. Beyer, but he is considered one of the top experts in this field. Including his view is necessary, and

certainly not the same as giving it "great respect."

This is not meant to insult anyone or belittle their choices; it's just a fact, and it's what makes being transgender so difficult. Most of the parents I met wanted to do right by their children and not by society. But that doesn't change the reality that they are pioneers, defying the establishment.

To submit a letter to the editor, please e-mail us at letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

**"I'm fortunate
to have survived
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an adult and
to be thriving
as the woman
I have always
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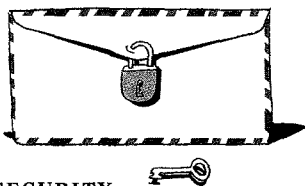
QUICK STUDY

PSYCHOLOGY

Psychic Friends

Lots of people hear voices in their heads—but only some are bothered by them. One group of voice-hearers in a recent study, who considered themselves psychics or mediums, said they found the voices “benevolent” and were more likely to engage with them than resist them. Members of a second group, who had sought psychiatric help, found the voices “malevolent and omnipotent,” and suffered more stress and anxiety. Hearing voices may not be as problematic as what the voices are saying.

—“The Relationship Between Trauma and Beliefs About Hearing Voices: A Study of Psychiatric and Non-Psychiatric Voice Hearers,” Psychological Medicine

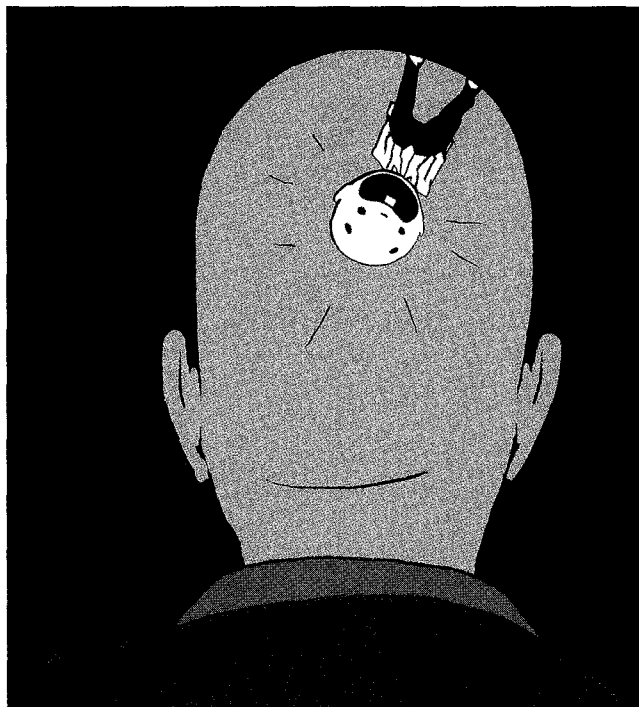


SECURITY

Pandora's Mailbox

By law, the U.S. Postal Service has had a monopoly on delivering mail to mailboxes since 1934. Should private couriers like FedEx be able to compete? That could be a big mistake: the government's highly trained mailmen work with the FBI and other agencies to weed out suspicious packages, prevent identity theft, and alert the public to consumer fraud—a layer of security that could be compromised by opening our mailboxes to hordes of private carriers.

—“The Role of the United States Postal Service in Public Safety and Security: Implications of Relaxing the Mailbox Monopoly,” Rand Corporation



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Caribbean Calamity

Without major security reforms, Haiti faces growing chaos and political collapse. Lax border control, violent drug runners, and a woeful prison system overburden the corrupt and undertrained police, and riots in April over food prices toppled the prime minister. More ominously, Hurricanes Fay, Gustav, Hanna, and Ike have left 800,000 in dire need.

—“Reforming Haiti's Security Sector,” International Crisis Group

RELIGION

Faith Healing

Religion: revealed truth, or evolutionary vaccine? The diversity of religions in a given country correlates closely with the number of parasites. In regions at greater risk for disease, people limit travel and interaction with outsiders to avoid pathogens. This reduces the flow of ideas and values, creates cultural

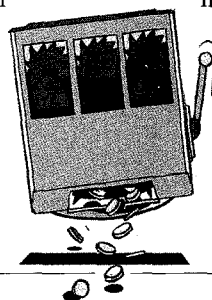
boundaries, and breeds new religions—presumably further minimizing contact with outsiders. Example: Brazil, which has a poor public-health system and rampant parasites, has 159 religions, while Canada, which has advanced health care and few parasites, has 15.

—“Assortative Sociality, Limited Dispersal, Infectious Disease and the Genesis of the Global Pattern of Religion Diversity,” Proceedings of the Royal Society

HISTORY

All In

Election-wagering sites like Intrade are only the latest version of a centuries-old market in political futures. So many Italians were betting on papal elections in the 16th century that Pope Gregory XIV threatened them with excommunication. In 18th-



century Britain, wagering on parliamentary elections became a national pastime. After the American Civil War, pari-mutuel political markets grew wildly popular. But such speculation dwindled as scientific polling improved, creating a lull that persisted until the Internet's rise.

—“Historical Political Futures Markets: An International Perspective,” National Bureau of Economic Research

ECONOMICS

Soldiers of Misfortune

Military personnel make easy marks for predatory lenders: they get paid regularly and are concentrated on bases. But soldiers who have access to payday loans pay a steep price, and not just because of interest rates: their performance declines, they severely misbehave more often, and they're less likely to be eligible to reenlist than those who don't have access to loan sharks.

—“In Harm's Way? Payday Loan Access and Military Personnel Performance,” Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia

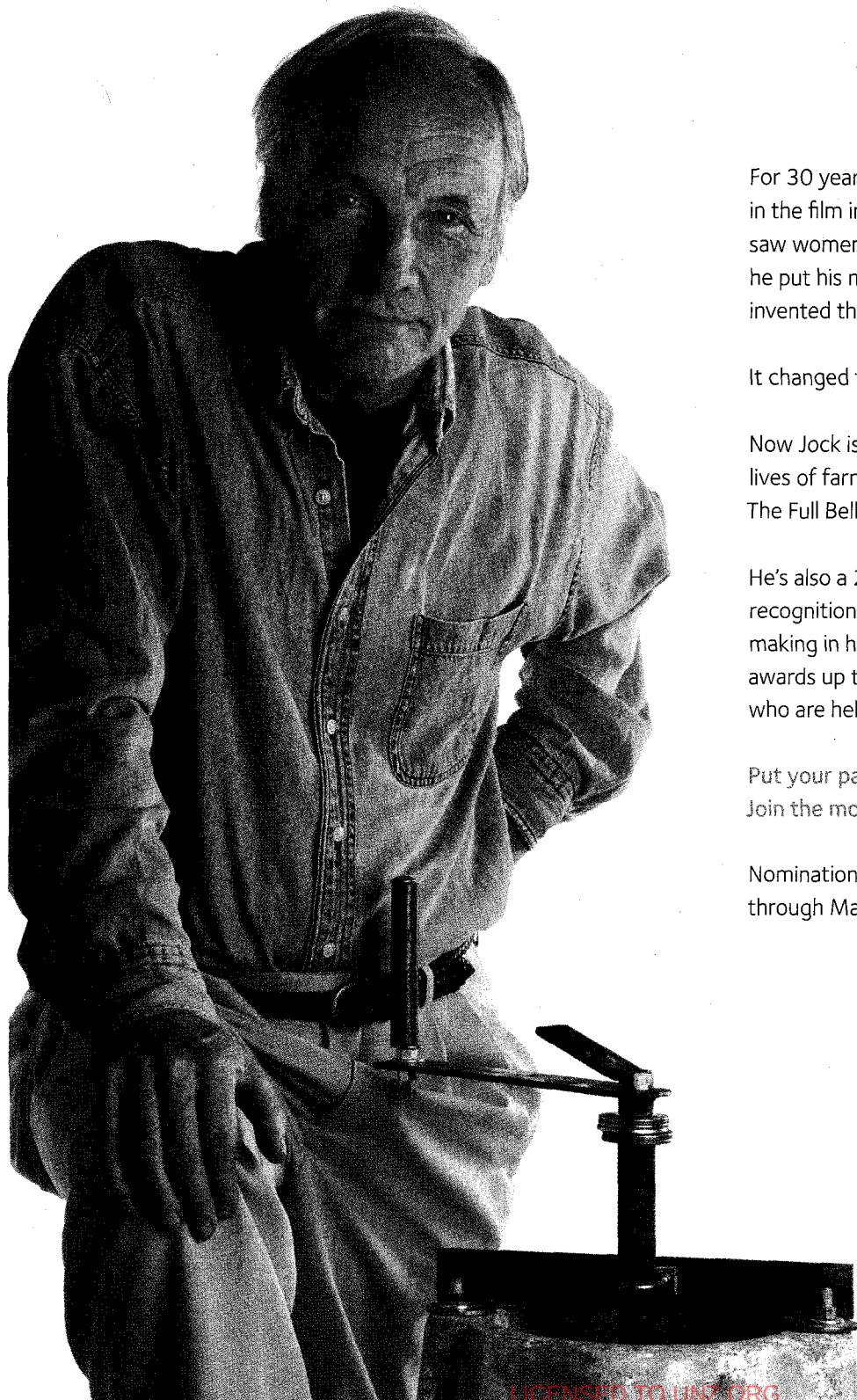
THE OFFICE

Bad Company

From the confirmed-suspensions file: sitting next to co-workers who bad-mouth the company makes you more cynical, less trustful of your bosses, and more likely to engage in bad-mouthing of your own.

—“A Test of Coworkers' Influence on Organizational Cynicism, Badmouthing, and Organizational Citizenship Behavior,” Journal of Applied Social Psychology

Then ; Now



For 30 years, Jock Brandis was a lighting director in the film industry. After a visit to Mali, where he saw women laboriously shelling peanuts by hand, he put his mechanical know-how to work and invented the Universal Nut Sheller.

It changed their lives and his.

Now Jock is a social entrepreneur, improving the lives of farmers in 17 countries with his organization, The Full Belly Project.

He's also a 2008 winner of The Purpose Prize, in recognition of the extraordinary contribution he's making in his encore career. The Purpose Prize awards up to \$100,000 each to people over 60 who are helping to meet society's biggest challenges.

Put your passion and experience to work.
Join the movement at encore.org.

Nominations for the 2009 Purpose Prize are open through March 5.



The Encore Careers campaign and The Purpose Prize are sponsored by Civic Ventures, a think tank on boomers, work, and social purpose. The Purpose Prize is funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies and the John Templeton Foundation.

DISPATCHES

FOREIGN AFFAIRS Graeme Wood visits the keeper of Muhammad's cloak.
CITIES Matt Dellinger explains why these are hopeful times (really) for mass transit.

FINANCE Tom Johansmeyer on why one hedge fund's riches are filthier than the rest

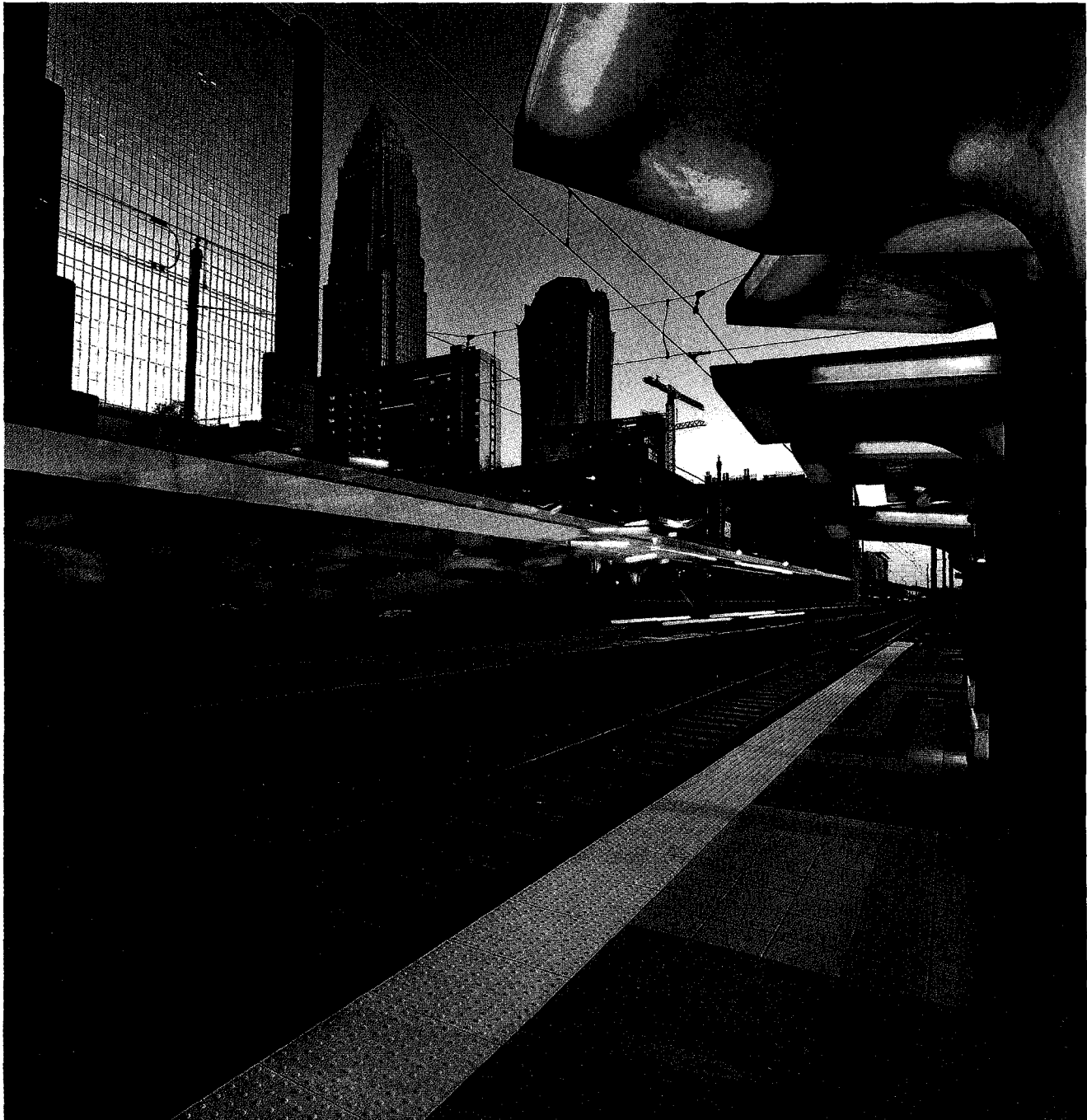
THE MILITARY Andrew Curry watches soldiers fight for supremacy in the kitchen.

LANGUAGE Lisa Abend learns the ancient tongue of the Basques.

DRINK Wayne Curtis on the return of the proper cocktail, only 75 years after Prohibition

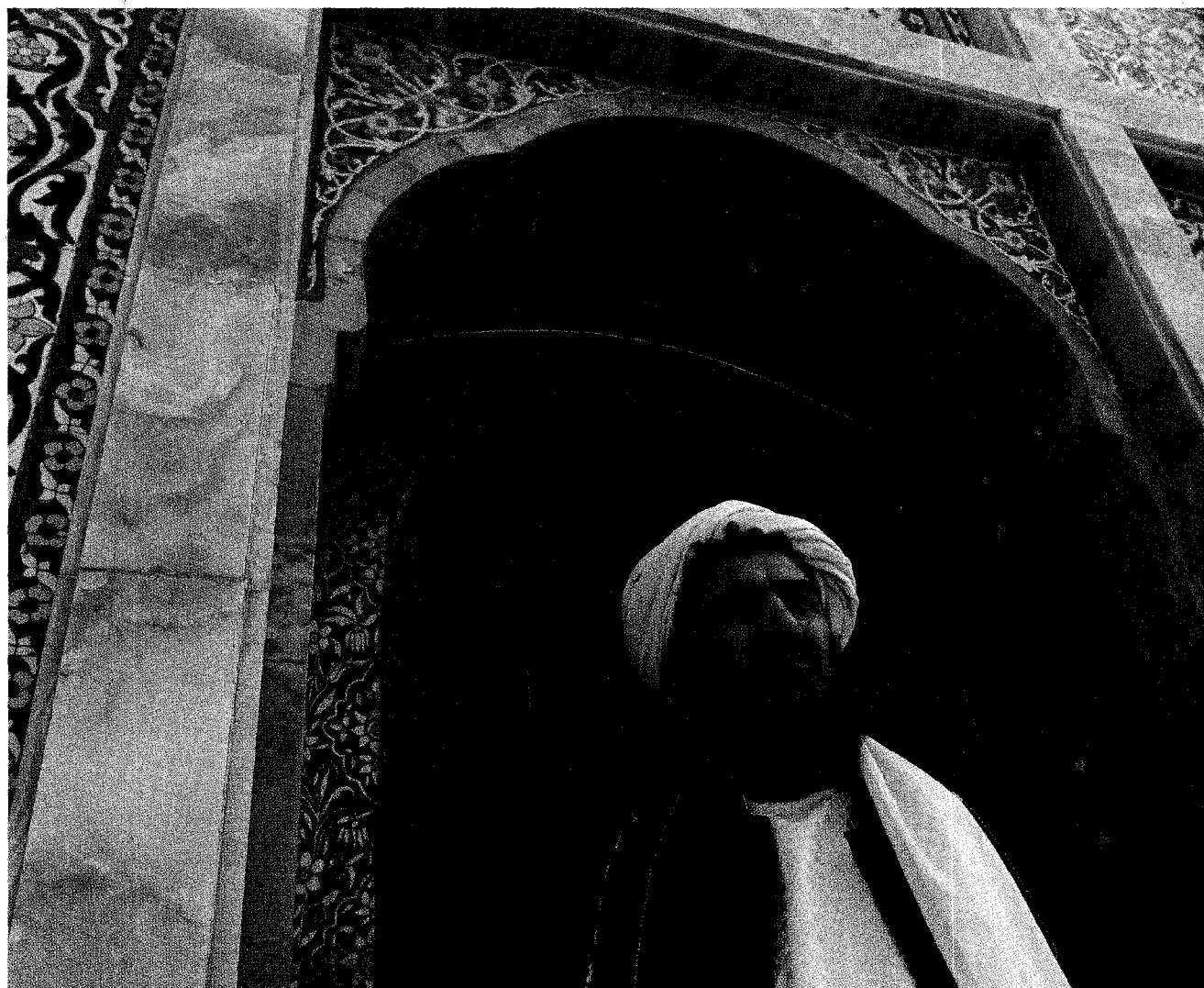
TRAVEL Bill Donahue ventures among Panama's sharks, monkeys, and free-roaming murderers.

TECHNOLOGY Douglas McGray foresees government Web sites that actually aren't atrocious.



PAUL PURSER/PHOTO CHARLOTTE

No acid trip: mass transit is transforming cities like Charlotte—for real this time.



The keeper of Muhammad's cloak, at the entrance to its shrine in Kandahar

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Security Blanket

AFGHANISTAN'S MOST VENERABLE RELIC FACES ITS GREATEST CHALLENGE.

By Graeme Wood

MULLAH MASOOD AKHUNDZADA, guardian of the Shrine of the Blessed Cloak of the Prophet Muhammad, in Kandahar, is wary of guests. When his brother was the guardian, 13 years ago, he accepted an insistent visitor. Today, a youngster with a Kalashnikov shadows Mullah Masood around the shrine, just in case the visitor, Mullah Omar, or any of his friends return.

The mosque itself is a modest cube with filthy blue-and-gilt mosaics. But in a poor city, it is an outpost of opulence and safety. When Masood and I relax in the courtyard, sipping imported packets of Iranian cherry juice, it seems as if we're at the estate of a country lord. Its most aggressive resident is the goat that mows the lawn. Aside from the bodyguard, there's little hint of the dangers outside: the area's main boulevard is Khuni Serok, or "Bloody Road"; on the way to the shrine, I passed the blackened divot left by a suicide bombing.

Pilgrims visit here to revere the cloak—a camel-fur garment said to have been woven by the prophet Enoch and presented by God to Muhammad after his Night Journey to heaven. Ahmad Shah Durrani brought it from Bukhara in 1768 and appointed the Akhundzada

family as its guardians. Since then, the Akhundzadas have guarded the cloak mostly from politicians like Ahmad Shah. When he wanted to be entombed with it, they cried blasphemy, and he relented, powerless before clergymen with a scrap of cloth. The cloak's prestige has, for the most part, kept the Akhundzadas safe and prosperous, as custodians of both the garment and the endowments that exist for its upkeep.

The cloak has no seams, Masood tells me, and no color. When on display, it can cure disease, convert the faithless, and end national disasters. The guardians allowed viewings during a cholera outbreak in the 1930s, and the cloak arrested the epidemic. Decades later, it quenched a drought.

Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, visited the shrine in 1996, shortly after

LOUIE PALU

seizing control of southern Afghanistan. "He came and asked to see the blessed cloak," says Masood, who is 33. "We told him that there are conditions: shave your armpits, shave your head, and wash yourself." Omar came back, clean and hairless.

But Omar wasn't satisfied. "The next time, he wanted to show it to the public," Masood says. "We were sort of annoyed." The guardians demanded a bigger sacrifice. Omar slaughtered 500 cattle and, over the guardians' objections, transported the cloak to a building on the city's outskirts and waved it from the rooftop before an adoring crowd. With his arms in the prophet's sleeves, Omar pronounced himself *amir al-mu'mineen*, "prince of the faithful," the title of the caliphs, the successors of the prophet.

Notwithstanding Omar's insistence, the guardians of the shrine have rarely permitted more than a peek at the cloak. But they allowed Gul Agha Shirzai, a U.S.-backed warlord, to see it, and welcomed five visits from President Hamid Karzai (although he apparently never saw the cloak itself). The Taliban have noticed the Akhundzadas' openness to the current government. Masood became the custodian last year, after his brother—who was one of Kandahar's senior clerics—was shot dead in a market. The city has suffered a killing spree of prominent citizens this year, in what many observers think is the Taliban's attempt to sow fear among influential Kandaharis.

Uneasy sleeps the mullah who keeps the cloak. Masood believes the current situation in Afghanistan merits drastic measures: "It's a suitable time now to show the cloak to the general public and have collective prayers with it." But he worries that the garment and its admirers would make irresistible bombing targets. "I'm afraid a public viewing must not happen, because of terrorist attacks," he says. "I am scared of incidents. There was an explosion in a mosque. Who did it? Taliban denied it, the government denied it, foreigners denied it." The cloak might cure disease, end hunger, and anoint kings. But bringing security to Kandahar may be beyond its powers. ■

Graeme Wood is an Atlantic staff editor.

CITIES

Road Worriers

WITH VOLATILE GAS PRICES, IMPLoding SUBURBAN REAL ESTATE, AND AN INCOMING ADMINISTRATION, THE NEW URBANISTS SEIZE THEIR MOMENT.
By Matt Dellinger

THE LOCALS ON the light-rail line in Charlotte, North Carolina, seemed amused by the horde of transportation tourists that crowded onto their cars one afternoon in early November. The visitors carried cameras, took notes, and seized on every detail: "This used to be an industrial corridor?" "How much do those station-side condos sell for?" "Does that bike trail follow the tracks the whole distance?" At the end of the line, the group followed a guide off the train and over to a large concrete park-and-ride garage. It was completely filled with cars! It had a soccer field on top! The crowd gawked and snapped photos like they were looking at Machu Picchu.

The explorers—a city planner from the Bay Area, an analyst for New York City Transit, a sustainability consultant from Indianapolis, an urban designer for the city of London, Ontario, and a dozen others—were members of the Congress for the New Urbanism, an organization of developers, architects, engineers, and activists who champion traditional, mixed-use neighborhoods over car-dependent suburban sprawl. The congress's choice of Charlotte for this year's transportation summit was

a belated endorsement. Ten years ago, downtown Charlotte was notable for its enormous bank towers, the staggering array of parking lots around them, and a paucity of city nightlife and historic charm. In 1998, the fed-up citizens of Mecklenburg County voted to increase their local sales tax by half a percent to pay for new transit, and today the city has a thriving bus system and the year-old Lynx light-rail line, which has already sparked more than \$1 billion in planned neighborhood development near its stations. About 17,000 riders board the train every weekday—a figure not far short of the initial projections for 2025.

These are hopeful times for mass-transit boosters. Public concern over gas prices and exurban home values has prompted voters in Los Angeles and Seattle, for example, to approve half-percent sales-tax hikes for new bus and rail lines. Not only is the federal transportation spending bill up for reauthorization in 2009, but Barack Obama (whose hometown of Honolulu just voted for its own local rail project) has explicitly supported smart-growth agendas, and plans to create a White House Office on Urban Policy.

How might the future look if the New Urbanists have their way? Like an idealized past, according to the suggested reforms they laid out in Charlotte, which they planned to present to Representative James Oberstar of Minnesota, the chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. John Norquist, the congress's president, spoke of replacing elevated freeways through cities with



One-track mind: As Charlotte goes, so goes the nation?

boulevards for driving, biking, walking, and shopping. Geoff Anderson, the president of Smart Growth America, said it was time to build more rail—"the second half of our transportation system," he called it.

Andres Duany, a co-founder of the Congress for New Urbanism, whose critiques on suburbia have often been dismissed as snobbery, told the group that the current synchronicity of the real-estate crash, global warming, and peak oil is not "some kind of cosmic punishment ... But there is one connection, and that's our urban pattern." It's not too late for Americans to change our ways, he said, but "it will be much harder to do better in the 21st century, because of the way we've built the 20th." ■

Matt Dellinger is at work on a book about Interstate 69.

FINANCE

Dirty Sexy Money

IS PORN RECESSION-PROOF?

By Tom Johansmeyer

"STICK YOUR MONEY with us. Let us invest it. When the market turns around, come back and get it," Francis Koenig says, sipping his chilled Labrusca at a Midtown Manhattan restaurant. In troubled times, a pitch for a safe bond fund, perhaps? Bondage might be more like it. Koenig is the founder and CEO

of AdultVest, which he bills as the adult-entertainment industry's first hedge fund, and according to him, he's doing just fine. His fund (with a mix of public and privately held assets) is up 50 percent this year, he says, based on "very conservative" outside appraisals.

In theory, depressed financial markets signal a buying opportunity, but Koenig believes that investors are now more cautious. Instead of seeking assets that are "on sale," they're looking for fundamentally different opportunities—which AdultVest is poised to deliver. "I had a meeting last night with about 15 major players," Koenig tells me. "All of them were very interested in the deal, and I believe about half of them will actually invest." Koenig wouldn't reveal the project to be financed, and he danced around names, saying only that I would recognize them—a coyness that, to be fair, both hedge funds and adult entertainment share. He says he met many of them at the *Alternative Investment News* Hedge Fund Industry Awards last June, when AdultVest won Hedge Fund Launch of the Year. (Other honorees included the Blackstone Group and the Teacher Retirement System of Texas.)

Relatively small, fragmented, and unaccustomed to outside investment, the U.S. porn industry (which generated roughly \$12 billion in 2007) is somewhat buffered from today's credit crunch, but it has its own problems. Video sales have been falling by

15 percent a year since 2005, and online content doesn't deliver the returns it used to, now that Web sites such as RedTube and PornHub basically give it away. Struggling companies need investors to help right their operations, and those that are thriving in a brutal market need funding for growth.

Enter Koenig and AdultVest. He sees the porn downturn as temporary and believes that technological improvements will trigger a turnaround. One example: iPorn, a start-up in AdultVest's portfolio that is developing an application to deliver porn to the Apple iPod. "The industry's not going anywhere," Koenig says. "You've got 6 billion people on the planet," he laughs, "and they're all horny." ■

Tom Johansmeyer is a freelance writer in New York.

THE MILITARY

Food Fight

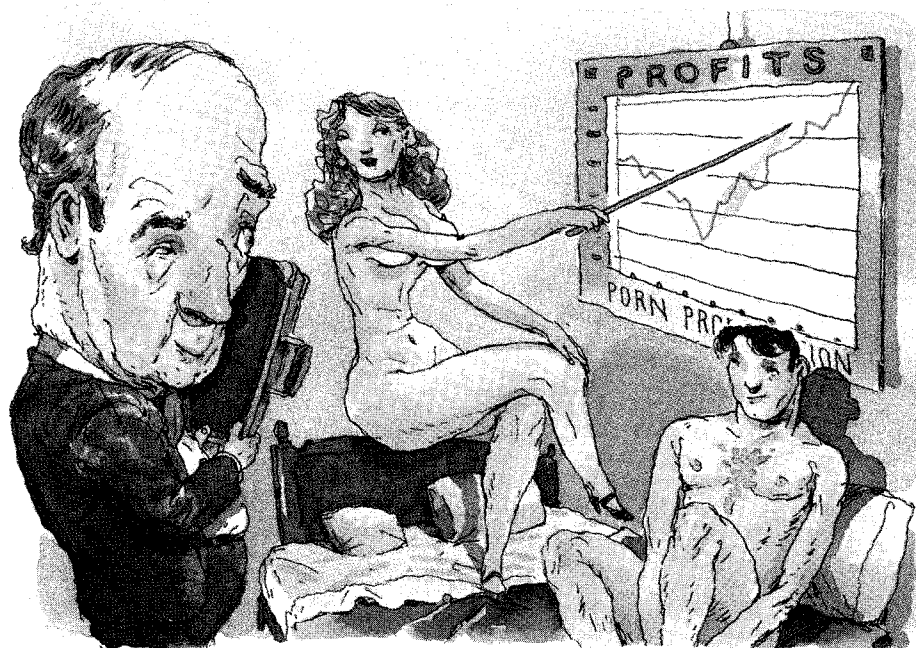
IRON CHEF,
ARMED-FORCES STYLE

By Andrew Curry

BY NINE ON a bright autumn morning, the Kaercher Futuretech field kitchen—essentially a giant, camouflaged, propane-fueled braising pan with wheels and a trailer hitch—was running at full steam outside a convention center in Erfurt, Germany. Six men and women moved around it with well-drilled precision. Dressed in chef's whites with U.S. Army Culinary Arts Team patches on their right shoulders, they had been wielding whisks and knives since 5 a.m.

Their mission? Cook 150 three-course meals in six hours. Their menu? Seared tuna, smoked trout, and poached salmon over a seaweed salad; herb-infused turkey breast with sweet potatoes, cranberry johnnycake, and bacon-wrapped green beans; and a chocolate-mousse crunch cake with apricot-and-cherry sauce. Their opponents? Military chefs from Switzerland, Germany, the U.K., Sweden, and five other countries, all gunning for the title of top military cook in the world.

The competition was part of the IKA/Culinary Olympics, which every four years pits chefs from 53 countries



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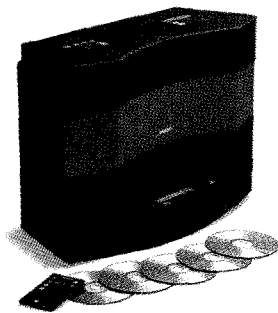
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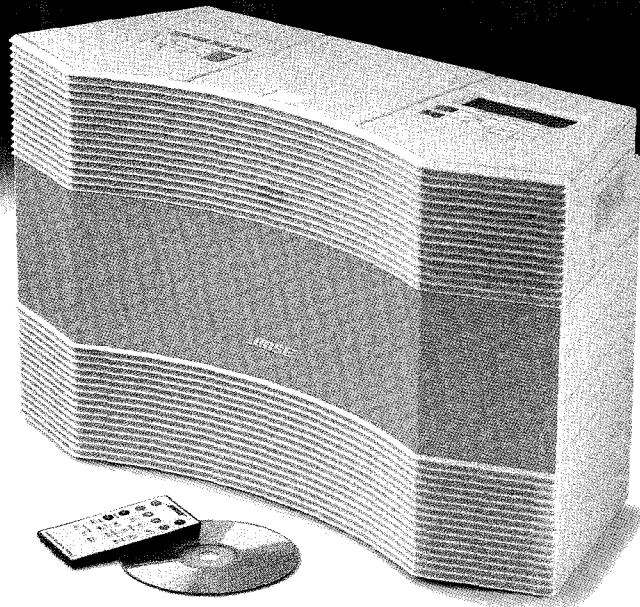
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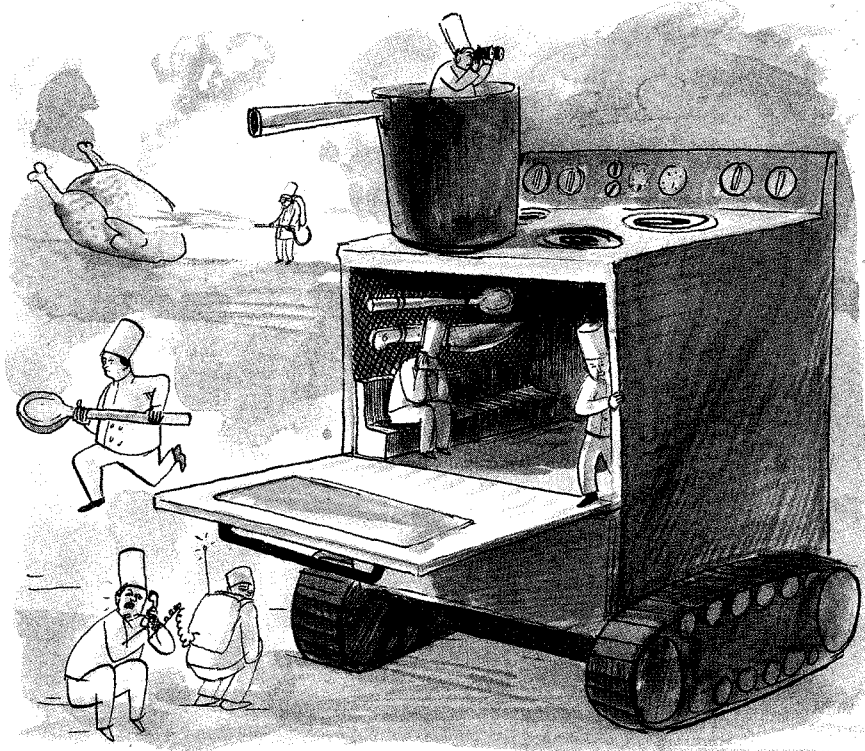
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against each other. While the civilians get to use gleaming restaurant kitchens, the military entrants must duel it out in tents, using the balky, German-made Kaerchers to prepare their gourmet meals. The U.S. team had been through its menu at least five times in its months of training; the chefs were on schedule and calm. Nearby, a team of glowering, mustachioed Hungarians in camo pants and combat boots was having a disastrous morning, shattering a stack of plates before the meal service even began and struggling to get a complicated vegetable-and-cod appetizer cooked all the way through.

But as the clock ticked down to zero, the U.S. team was scrambling to deal with a slight glitch: the field kitchen was throwing off so much steam that water had begun to condense on the inside of the tent and rain back down on the food. "Can we get something plastic?" shouted Army Sergeant Matthew Flemister. "It's dripping right on our plates!" Toward the back of the tent, Army Specialist Valine Vukich, a petite, tattooed former sous-chef from Chicago, was busy wiping spoiled chocolate motifs off pristine Villeroy & Boch china and reapplying them with a pastry bag, all the while darting watchful glances at a chocolate mousse in danger of congealing.

This year's team was selected through an Army-sponsored competition that any active-duty military chef can enter. Held annually in Fort Lee, Virginia, it's the largest military culinary competition in America. The Army sees it, and the team it produces, as a morale boost for soldiers, whose meals benefit from the skills the Army's chefs pick up in training. The Culinary Arts Team is also a draw for potential recruits: enlisted chefs can use their Army training to find jobs as everything from gourmet chefs and caterers to ice sculptors when they muster out. Sending the team to civilian competitions in the U.S. and abroad is also a PR effort, targeted with a sniper's accuracy: the Culinary Olympics attracts some of the restaurant world's top civilian talent. "It's important to show all these other chefs that military chefs can really shake and bake," said Army Chief Warrant Officer 4 Robert Sparks, the team's manager and a veteran of four previous Culinary Olympics.

This year at Erfurt, the Americans came in second to the Swiss, outscoring eight other countries. (The Hungarians came in sixth.) For some team members, the outcome represented a vindication of sorts. "I'm trying to beat the stereotype of can-to-pan cooking," said Petty Officer Second Class Edward Fuchs, who usually cooks for 50 sailors on a

Coast Guard cutter based in Cheboygan, Michigan, as he watched his teammates garnish their appetizers with whale-tail-shaped crackers. "We're all issued more than a can opener and a box cutter." ■

Andrew Curry is a freelance journalist based in Berlin.

LANGUAGE

Found in Translation

THE BASQUES RECLAIM THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITY, ONE WORD AT A TIME.

By Lisa Abend

BY THE TIME I pull up to the farmhouse in the Spanish region of Navarre, the other students have already arrived. Waiting for lunch, we nervously pretend that we understand what's going on. A blond woman whose name I can't pronounce points to a bottle as she pours each student a glass and says, with exaggerated clarity, "*Ardoa*" ("wine").

It's the first word I learn at this *barne-tegi*, or Basque-language immersion school, and its ordinariness comes as a relief. Until now, as an American living in Spain, the only Basque words I'd managed to glean have to do with violence and power: *ertzaintza* ("police"), *kale borroka* ("street violence"), *etarra* ("terrorist" or "freedom fighter," depending on your point of view). The media use the words every time an arrest, a demonstration, or an assassination—there was one in September—takes place. Indeed, most of what anyone in or outside Spain hears about Basques has to do with ETA, the radical group that has killed more than 800 people in the past 40 years in its quest for an independent Basque homeland.

"In the rest of Spain, they only talk about us as a problem—the Basque problem," says Amaia Marin, who is attending an intermediate course at the *barne-tegi*. She is Basque but doesn't know Euskera, the Basque language, because it was not taught in schools when she was growing up. She doesn't see herself as particularly political and thinks of independence as little more than "a pretty dream." But she

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was driven to learn Euskera, she says, because "being Basque is the thing I'm most proud of in my life."

Thousands of years old, Euskera has no links to any other known tongue, living or dead. That alone makes it the clearest sign of Basque identity. Franco sought to suppress the language during his dictatorship. In Spain today, when Basques enjoy greater autonomy than at any time since the 19th century, and when Spanish conservatives see that autonomy as a threat to national unity, the language remains a political issue. In some parts of Basque country, a town meeting held in Spanish is reason for protest, even vandalism; meanwhile, new laws that require 2,000 large businesses to offer their services in both Euskera and Spanish have triggered strong opposition outside Basque country. But for people like Amaia, Euskera is a way out of the Basque problem, a way to be Basque regardless of politics.

The number of Euskera speakers has risen in recent years, from 657,000 in 2001 to 775,000 (out of a total Basque population of about 3 million) in 2006. This growth can be attributed largely to schools—parents can choose how much Euskera training their children get, and the majority favor some education in their ancestral tongue. Yet 100,000 of those speakers have learned the language as adults. In my group, Celia and Maite are here because their employer—Microsoft—is expanding into Basque country, while Italian-born Nicoletta, Chilean Paula, and Spanish Dani are married to Basques and have signed up because their children are learning Euskera in school.

In class, we struggle through introductions and learn to count to 10. (Actually, we learn to count to 100, but I'm so flustered by the compound words that I falter at the double digits.) We learn directions and body parts, including *zakila* ("penis") and *alua* ("vagina")—the Basques are nothing if not frank. In between lessons, we go for coffee in Bakaiku, a pretty mountain village west of Pamplona, where the stone houses are adorned with fat geraniums. It's an idyllic place if you ignore the pro-independence graffiti and posters that spring up every night—one of which gives me my first thrill of

GALLERY THE BRIGHT SIDE by Yuko Shimizu



comprehension: *EUSKAL HERRIA AURRERA*, "Forward With the Basque Country."

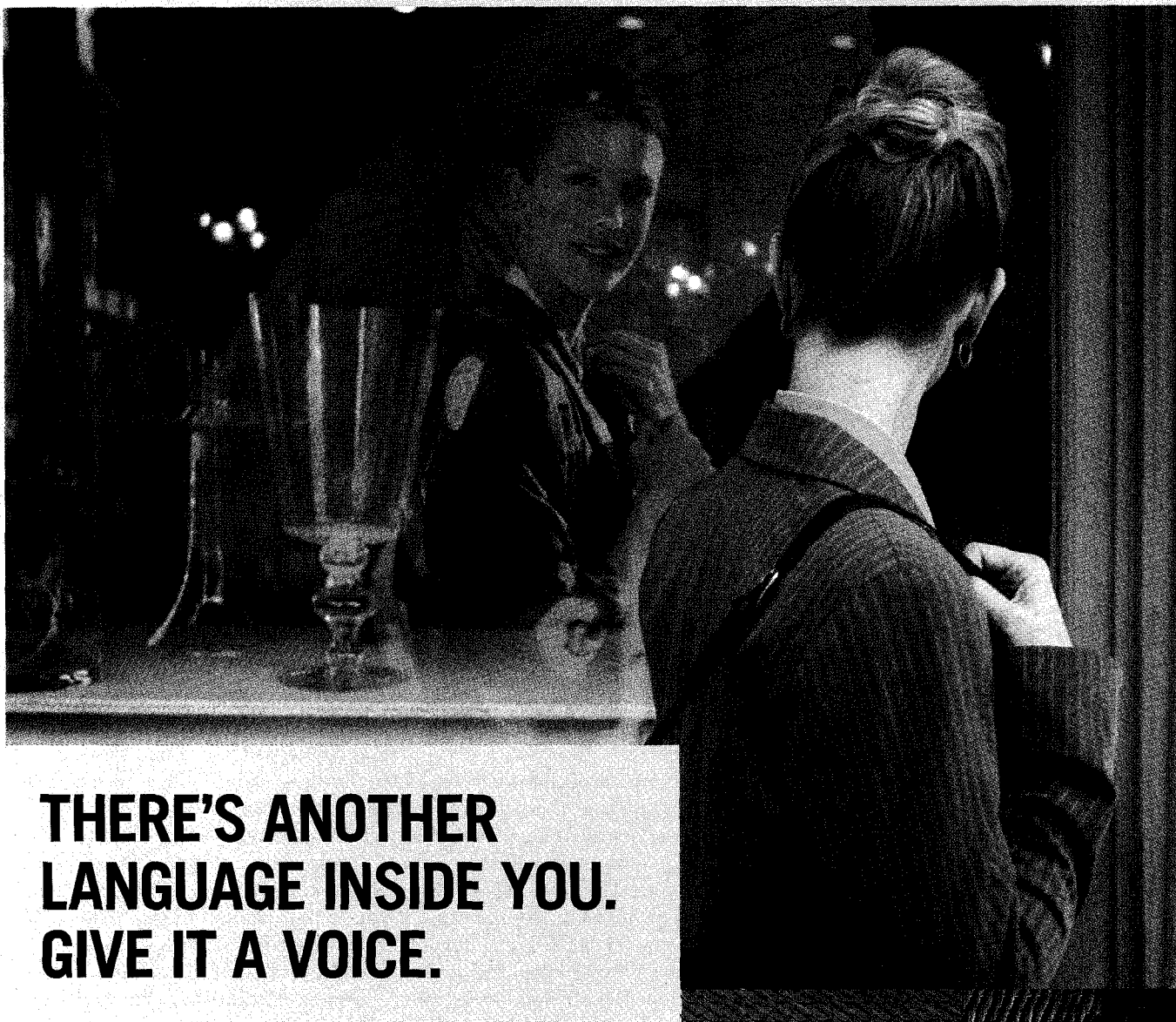
No one teaches politics at the *barne-tegi*, but subtle messages slip in among the vocabulary words heavy with x's and z's. A geography lesson shows the Basque provinces without any boundary delineating the three in France from the four in Spain. And we get an explanation of the ancient *fueros*, laws that granted the Basques certain rights and privileges in exchange for loyalty to the kingdom of Castile.

But the rise in Euskera has not necessarily fed secessionist impulses. "The fact that you learn the language doesn't mean that you'll vote for a nationalist party," says Xabier Monasterio, the director of pedagogy at the Gabriel

Aresti school, which runs this *barne-tegi*. Support for the conservative Basque Nationalist Party has stayed relatively constant over the past 10 years. So has the percentage of Basques who want independence from Spain (35 percent) over the past two decades.

"I love teaching Euskera, because it is the language of our people," Monasterio says. "It's who we are. It's not better or worse than any other language—it's just ours." I think about his words during the last class, which we spend singing Basque songs. There are hymns to innocent love and odes to sailors, but the most moving song consists of just the words *gueria da*—"it's ours"—repeated over and over. To the tune of "Hava Nagila." ■

Lisa Abend is a writer living in Spain.



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DRINK

Old-Fashioned

OUR CORRESPONDENT TOASTS A GROWING TREND:
THE RETURN OF THE CLASSIC COCKTAIL.

by Wayne Curtis

AN ONLINE REVIEWER of a new cocktail bar in Boston recently wrote, "The real highlight of this place is their ability to give you what you want, even when you don't know what that is."

The bar is called Drink, and I stopped in with a friend right after it opened, last fall. It has a clean, almost apothecary sparseness, with lots of sharp angles and galvanized steel and slate. No bottles are on display. Spirits are measured from stainless-steel jiggers that resemble beakers, and the aromatic bitters are kept in eyedroppers, for precise dispensing. And there's no cocktail list. The idea is that your bartender is your pharmacist and, after a brief chat, will prescribe something based on your needs and past preferences. (Pharmacy is evidently ascendant in modern cocktail culture; in the past year, Apothecary opened in Philadelphia, and Apothéke in New York.)

We found seats next to the ice station, where our bartender was doing an admirable imitation of Tony Perkins in *Psycho*, attacking a massive block of ice with a frightful-looking pick and afflicting those in the vicinity with

small, sleety squalls. Other tools were arrayed on a white towel, like an exhibit of Civil War medical instruments: three-pronged ice tongs, dull knives, a wooden mallet. After carving out several fist-sized hunks of ice, she came over to take our order. Her diagnostic abilities were not yet fully honed, however, and I ended up self-prescribing an Old-Fashioned, with extra bitters. The drink that arrived was exactly the healing tonic I'd hoped for, with a perfect balance of sweet and bitter and the alcohol's sharpness, none bullying the others—and such beautiful ice!

Drink's decision to eschew a cocktail menu is a rarity, but the bar is representative of a welcome new trend: lounges that celebrate classic cocktails and take pains to make them with the best ingredients and according to the canon of the great cocktail books (which, happily, are also coming back: Jerry Thomas's pioneering 1862 cocktail guide, *How to Mix Drinks*, and David Embury's 1948 classic, *The Fine Art of Mixing Drinks*, have recently been released in new editions). These sorts of bars have sprouted up in a number of cities, including Seattle, San Francisco, and New York.

The bartenders at such places are often referred to as "mixologists." People tend to smirk at the term, and I don't blame them. It sounds preposterous and self-aggrandizing—but it's historically accurate. It first appeared in 1856, when cocktails were compounded like patent medicines, and it was intended to suggest precision and care. As the cocktail authority Dale DeGroff has noted, the cocktail is "as American as jazz, apple pie, and baseball." Classic cocktail bars are to the toper what the new crop of "classic" baseball stadiums are to the sports fan—places where we can cheer a return to our roots.

For me, the best aspect of these bars isn't that they're essentially theme parks where you can drink, but that the drinks highlight rather than mask the tastes of the spirits. This is as it should be. Lading drinks with overly sweet mixers, thick juices, and fruits amounts, in a way, to a continuation of Prohibition. During the 13-year drought, Americans applied considerable creativity to hiding the taste of bathtub gin and bootlegged liquor, and then never really broke the habit. Seventy-five years after Prohibition's repeal, we're returning to the basics at last.

I admire what Drink is doing in eliminating the cocktail menu: asking you to put yourself in the hands of a knowledgeable guide who can edge you beyond your comfort zone into a new experience. Still, I hope it eventually prints one up. Sometimes the bartender will be too harried to take a full patient history, and perusing a list of drinks and their ingredients is a great education. I also hope Drink might embrace another new trend, that of listing obscure classic cocktails interpreted by and credited to talented bartenders working today in other cities. Such a list is like a blog with links to other worthwhile blogs, except that the links are potable.

I like to think that bars such as Drink are not a fad, but rather part of a growing network of universities that will teach a new generation of mixologists and drinkers how to make and appreciate a proper cocktail. And that one day, with a little luck, we'll be able to order a perfectly crafted Manhattan or Jack Rose or Sidecar at any airport bar. ■

Wayne Curtis is an Atlantic correspondent.

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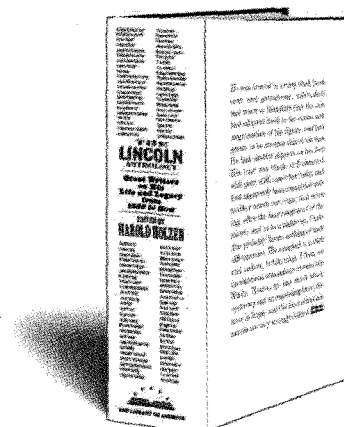
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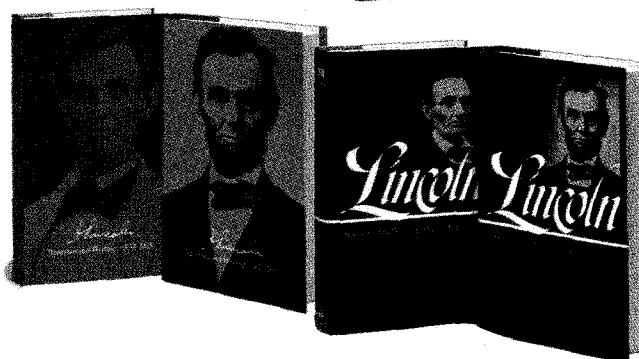
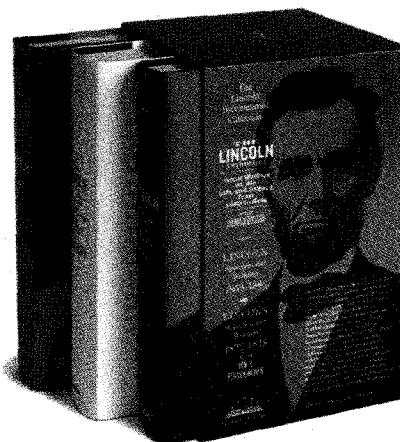
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TRAVEL

Strange Paradise

PANAMA HAS PRISTINE JUNGLES, A NASCENT ECOTOURISM INDUSTRY—AND THE DARK ALLURE OF A GRAHAM GREENE NOVEL.

By Bill Donahue

THE BIRDS, I learned later, were toucans. But as I made my way through the Panamanian jungle, their dry, echoing call—*whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*—sounded almost mechanical, which seemed fitting. Before me, on an open plain in the Galeta Island Protected Landscape, was a mesh of 100-foot-high wires used by the United States during the Cold War to monitor Soviet submarines.

"They used to have a phone that connected straight to the White House," my guide, a Panamanian student, remarked somberly. "And there was an underground tunnel soldiers could use to escape right out into the ocean."

Of course, neither the tunnel nor the phone ever existed. But they were lovely details, embodying the mystique of Panama today. As the nation vaults toward prosperity, with an 8 percent average annual GDP growth rate, it is

MORE ONLINE

For a slideshow of Panama narrated by Bill Donahue, visit www.theatlantic.com/panama.
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still haunted by its past—by the seven-year rule of Manuel Noriega, and by nearly 100 years of American soldiers guarding the canal. Noriega and the GIs left behind mementos that collectively have the dark, exotic ambiance of a Graham Greene novel. They also left behind pristine jungles—the U.S. allowed no logging in the rainforest surrounding the canal, because the trees afforded cover from potential attacks—and a serious ecotourism industry is

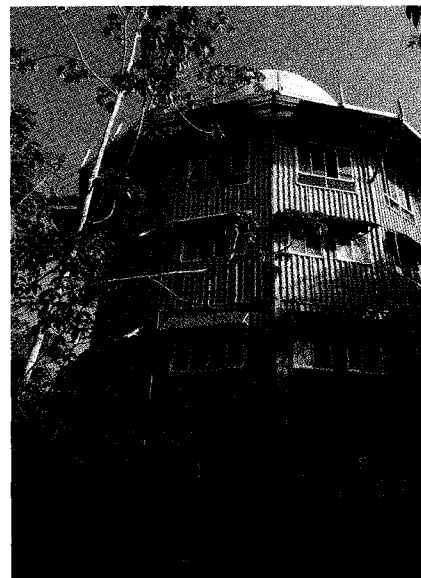
sprouting up. So I went south for a few days, bringing my flip-flops and snorkeling gear.

Thirty minutes outside Panama City is a former radar tower that the U.S. once used to monitor the canal. Lavishly renovated, the three-story cylinder is now the Canopy Tower hotel, a mecca for serious birders. From the roof, you can see parrots and parakeets swooping through the mist and the trees. Birdwatching's high Brahmins—Jimmy Carter, Jimmy Buffett, Martha Stewart—have all stayed here.

When I visited, there was a group, eight strong, from a Texas-based tour company. I joined them in the open-air "Rainfomobile" for three hours of hushed observation. For 20 minutes, we stood by a swampy pond, trying to home in on a small fluttering piratic flycatcher in the brambles. "If you look up at that branch there," the guide whispered, "and follow it to that little knob—"

"I got it!" one man cried. "I got some butt!"

GAVRIEL JECAN/CORBIS



The Canopy Tower hotel, a former U.S. radar installation, is surrounded by virgin rainforest and exotic wildlife.

I found myself yearning for a grittier encounter with the country's past, and thought I might find it on Coiba Island, 15 miles off Panama's Pacific coast. A penitentiary since 1919, Coiba is now the centerpiece of a bounteous national park, Galápagos-like, with more than 20 endemic bird species. It is also still a prison, though with only a handful of inmates.

In Santiago, four hours south of Panama City, I met up with a guide taking 17 others—Panamanians on holiday, mostly—to the island. We rode in a minivan for two hours, walked a couple of miles along a dirt road, and then piled into an aluminum outboard. "*Paraíso!*" our guide declared when at last we drew near. "*Es como Hawái!*"

Maybe—with a little Guantánamo thrown in. On the beach, we were greeted by a jaunty, 60-something man with a gun—a prison guard. Around us were some 3,000 cows. The guard explained that they were there thanks to a bureaucratic snag: "The prisoners used to butcher the herd, but now

the Ministry of Justice doesn't allow it, and the cows can't leave—they'd die of shock on the boat."

We meandered past a grove of trees, and in the branches was a small, skittish bird that I loved as much for its name in Spanish as for its appearance. *Sangre de toro* is a tanager with a breast and throat carpeted, it seemed, with crimson velvet. Nearby, a sleek jackrabbit-like mammal, a *neque*, fidgeted on the ground, its back hunched, its eyes bulging. Howler monkeys, smaller than their mainland cousins, bounded in the branches above.

After a while, we met a man chopping vegetables who is serving a 16-year sentence for murder. He asked me to sit down beside him, and quietly extolled the joys of Coiba. "The fresh air!" he said. "The peace!"

I asked what he did with his time.

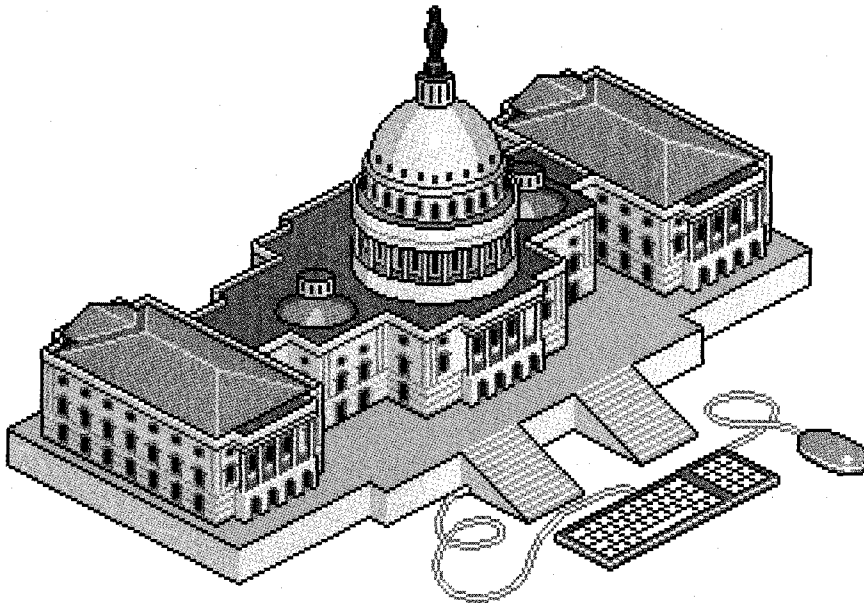
"Cook," he said, "and take care of the cows—make sure they don't die. Like, if the little ones get caught in the sand, we help them out."

He was so placid that I found our

conversation disorienting. What kind of murderer was this guy? And what kind of country would let tour groups hang out with murderers? On Coiba, I often felt somewhat disoriented. I like to swim long distances, and every time I strapped on my goggles, a young Panamanian raised his hand and warned, "*Los tiburones!*" The sharks! I couldn't tell if he was joking. For all I knew, Coiba is home to sharks that feast on gringos. But still I swam with abandon: over coral reefs, and scuttling crabs, and twisting schools of electric-blue fish.

One time, I misunderstood our guide and jumped in while everyone else stayed on the boat. I was alone in the water when a giant black manta ray came billowing along, headed shoreward. Its body was boneless; it moved like a flopping prehistoric bird in slow motion. As it passed by I just watched it, savoring another strange delight in a strange land. **A**

Bill Donahue is a writer in Portland, Oregon.



TECHNOLOGY

iGov

HOW GEEKS ARE OPENING UP GOVERNMENT ON THE WEB

By Douglas McGray

BARACK OBAMA HAS said we need a “Google for government.” It’s a nice line, but what does it mean? Federal agencies have been online since the mid-’90s. Obama’s first crack at a Google-for-government law led to USAspending.gov, a budget tracker that looked like everything else the feds had put up on the Web—until I saw one geek-speak phrase on the home page, so small I almost missed it: *API Documentation*. To understand its significance, let me tell you how I got subway schedules on my iPhone.

Just a few days after Apple’s iPhone launched, a trip planner for the San Francisco Bay Area’s subway system, BART, appeared in the iTunes application store, which sells iPhone and iPod software for download. User reviews were mixed. But I was still floored. How could a local government agency move so quickly?

Turns out, it didn’t. In 2007, Google engineers asked public-transit agencies across the country to submit their arrival and departure data in a simple, standard, open format—a text file, basically, with a bunch of numbers separated by commas—so Google Maps could generate bus and subway directions. A handful of agencies, including

BART, decided to go a step further and publish that raw data online. Once they did that, any programmer could grab the data and write a trip planner, for any platform.

“It’s not 1995,” BART’s Web-site manager, Timothy Moore, explained. “A single Web site is not the endgame anymore. People are planning trips on Google, they’re using their iPhones. Because we opened up our schedule, we are in those places.”

A couple weeks after that first BART application appeared, a new trip planner went live. This one, called iBART, was a thing of beauty. Free, too. It was written by two former high-school buddies—Ian Leighton, a sophomore at UC Berkeley, and David Hodge, a sophomore at the University of Southern California. Forty thousand people downloaded the program in just a few weeks.

“We’ve created competition among developers,” Moore said, “to see who can serve our customers best.”

I met Moore and Leighton at a gathering in Silicon Valley called TransitCamp. Inspired by a similar event in Toronto, the idea was to brainstorm what you might do with transit-agency data. Nearly 100 people came. One guy was looking to build a Web site that combined an online ride-share

forum with BART arrival and departure times. A pilot who runs an air-taxi business was hoping to mash up flight, bus, and subway schedules. Environmental activists were seeking new ways to get cars off the street.

What does any of this have to do with the federal budget? Well, USAspending.gov might look like any other government Web site, but its API—that’s Application Programming Interface—allows access to the site’s raw data in an open, standard file format, similar to a transit feed. (“Wow,” Moore said. “That’s really powerful.”) Enterprising programmers, researchers, bloggers, or watchdogs like the Sunlight Foundation or Govtrack can grab that data and slice it, dice it, chart it, graph it, map it, or mash it up with new feeds.

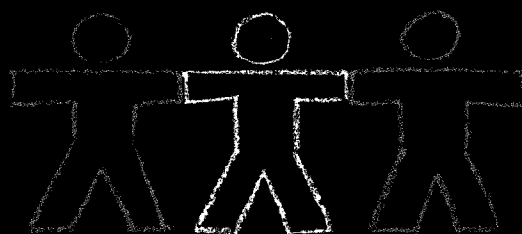
It’s not just the API that’s a big deal, Greg Elin, Sunlight’s chief data architect, told me. “It’s the discipline an API imposes,” he said. To build one, an agency has to record and store data in a way that anticipates public use. “Data sharing is no longer an afterthought,” Elin explained. “You begin with the notion that you’re going to share information. And you’re going to make it easy for people.” (Compare that with the approach of the Federal Communications Commission, which allows only limited searching of filings and comments; or that of the Department of Justice, which puts out data on foreign lobbying in unwieldy PDF format and binders.) An API also encourages the release of data in real time, instead of in occasional reports, like Federal Election Commission figures, or earmark spending.

Last September, Moore added a feed that broadcasts imminent train arrivals in real time. He’s eager to see what people will do with it. “We can’t envision every beneficial use for our data,” Moore told me. “We don’t have the time, we don’t have the resources, and frankly, we don’t have the vision. I’m sure there are people out there who have better ideas than we do. That’s why we’ve opened it up.”

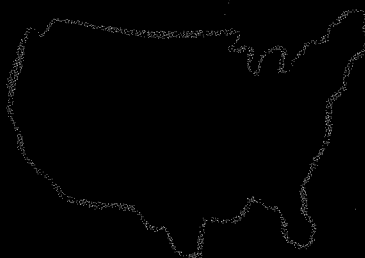
We’d know a lot more about our government if Washington opened up the same way. ■

Douglas McGray is an Irvine Fellow at the New America Foundation.

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Lost in Space

Is *Battlestar Galactica* a great television epic—or proof that there is no such thing?

By James Parker

IN THE EXPERT view of L. Ron Hubbard, there was nothing futuristic about the genre called (flippantly, by some) “space opera.” The alien host, the spongy nebulae, the zip and twang of the photon torpedo, the bluster of the starship captain at his bridge—these, according to Hubbard, were not the idle tropes of pulp-fictioneers and drugged-up sci-fi hacks but the stuff of deepest prehistory, somber emanations from the memory of the species. It had already happened, in other words—it, or something rather like it. Humanity trickled down from beyond the stars. Billion-year colonial wars were fought and fought again. And that cold buzz of awe that we get from galactic-scale science fiction? Just the rumbling of our “implants” as they salute their origins in deep space.

Hubbard, of course, founded an extraordinarily profitable religion,

incorporating the virgin science of Dianetics as well as a sprawling mythos of interplanetary invasions and implantations—Scientology! The makers of *Battlestar Galactica* have not demonstrated a similar ambition—no temples for them, as yet. They can lay claim, however, to a decent-sized viewing cult. The original show ran on ABC for one season in the late 1970s, with Lorne “Bonanza” Greene in Aquarian robes as the *Galactica*’s Commander Adama. After its cancellation, various attempts at revival were made, but nothing significant panned out until the project passed into the hands of writer-producers David Eick and Ronald D. Moore in the early 2000s, at which point the great “reimagining” of *Battlestar Galactica* began.

Ratings for the new show, now beginning its concluding run on the

Sci-Fi Channel, have wavered, but fandom and critical interest have been maintained at a heady pitch. Hailed as “the best show on TV,” “one of TV’s boldest and best dramas,” and “a fleet of

red herrings flapping majestically through space” (that last one is mine), *Battlestar Galactica* boasts a fierce corps of geeks and a professorial secondary literature to rival that of ABC’s *Lost*. (I had to look up, for example, the word *diegesis*—n. A nar-

rative or history—while reading *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*.)

Hubbard might have smiled upon this show’s basic premise. We—mankind, that is—come not from Earth, which is out there somewhere, but from the planet Kobol, whence we set forth long ago in our ships to found the Twelve Colonies: Caprica, Leonis,

MORE ONLINE

For audio commentary by James Parker on clips from *Battlestar Galactica*, visit www.theatlantic.com/battlestar.
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NASA, ESA, AND THE HUBBLE HERITAGE TEAM (STSC/AURA)

Gemenon, and the rest. All went well until the Cylons, a race of man-made androids turned hostile, descended from their glassy star-bower to wipe us out. They took us by surprise, the bastards. Copious nuking, enormous loss of life—but one military vessel, or battlestar (the *Galactica*), survived, along with a few charred and limping people-carriers and their inhabitants. This rump of humanity, 50,000 or so, would hereafter be hounded across the universe by the implacable Cylon horde. The survivors' goal: to find Earth, the fabled 13th colony, and begin civilization anew.

So far, so space operatic. But here *Battlestar Galactica* veers sharply away. Where a proper space opera—from *Star Wars* to 2000's Scientological *Battlefield Earth*—advertises with chilly pride its remoteness from life as we know it, the retooled *Battlestar Galactica* has plunged into the burning issues of the day. Suicide bombers, torture, occupation, stolen elections. Homosexuality, reproductive rights, religious fundamentalism, genocide. All of it grappled with, workshopped out—diegetically, you might say. With crater-voiced Edward James Olmos in the role of Adama, and the *Galactica* itself—rather gaily lit in its '70s incarnation—now steeped in an atmosphere somewhere between that of a diving submarine and a backstreet in the Victorian East End, Moore and Eick have pushed and pushed at the hot buttons. Un-addressed as yet: steroid abuse, the slow-food movement, and the declining standard of international travel. But there's still half a season to go.

Of course, not everybody approves of the new direction. Dirk Benedict, who in the original series played the satyric flying ace and cigar-smoker Starbuck, was appalled to discover that his character had been reconceived as a woman—an angry and outspoken woman (Katee Sackhoff) at that, smoking a goddamned cigar! It was feminism, it was the humorless temper of the times—and from his home in the great state of Montana, the old trouper issued a counterblast. “The creative artists have lost and the Suits have won,” he declared in an essay for the May 2004 issue of the magazine *Dreamwatch*. “Suits. Administrators.

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Technocrats. Metro-sexual money-men (and women) who create formulas to guarantee profit margins.” The title of the essay was “Starbuck: Lost in Castration.” (Other members of the old guard proved more tractable. Richard Hatch, the original Captain Apollo, found a new role—while preserving, remarkably, the old hairstyle—as Tom Zarek, a William Ayers-like bomb-thrower who rehabilitates himself and becomes vice president.)

Moore, a veteran of the *Star Trek* franchise (he worked on *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Voyager*), has used the term *naturalistic science fiction* to describe his approach to *Battlestar Galactica*. The vibe is grim. The camera wobbles. The sound track is heavy on loping percussion and chilly pokes of piano. Is the dialogue finely wrought? It is, for the most part, not. It is stunted, sleep-deprived, 21st-century: “I can’t live like this!” “I worked my ass off defending this fleet!” *Frak*, the show’s patented profanity, gets plenty of use: “Frak you!” “Frakkin’ A!” “Talk to me, you motherfrakker!!!” The characters announce themselves not as heroic starmen but as pissed-off human beings—the hulking Helo (Tahmoh Penikett), with his gumshield frown, husband to a Cylon wife, father to a hybrid child; or Colonel Tigh (Michael Hogan), Adama’s executive officer, boozing and snarling like a rogue priest. Incest thickens the air: attractions and enmities abound, and there’s always some sinewy scuffle or mating dance happening below decks. The battlestar churns on, pathologically spawning its subplots. Loyalties shift; marriages break up; roles are redefined; crew members who considered themselves more or less human make the nasty discovery that they are Cylons.

This last story line demands some explanation. The Cylons in the original *Battlestar Galactica* were not man-made—they were just violent robots from outer space. It was Moore and Eick who gave the Cylons a human provenance and, what’s more, the power to

re-create themselves in human form: there are still plenty of violent robots, but 12 exquisitely bioengineered humanoid models now lead the Cylon race—battery-farmed people, with personalities, indistinguishable from the real thing. They bleed, they feel. Pure nectar to the sci-fi buff, who loves to whirl his wings in these realms of ontological vexation: Who is real, after all? And what does it mean to *exist*? And is it nice to have sex with a machine?

Former model Tricia Helfer plays Cylon Number Six—a glittering and sibilant entity in high heels. She spends a good deal of time snaking around inside the mind of the treacherous human Gaius Baltar (James Callis), making suggestions; Baltar has trouble working out whether she is an implanted Cylon chip or simply his subconscious frakking with him. In a further twist, the Cylons of the new breed are devout monotheists, full of inflated talk about “God’s plan,” while the benighted humans mutter prayers to the Twelve Lords of Kobol. The Cylon position vis-à-vis the meaning of life is complicated by the fact that they have no experience of death:

should a Cylon’s mortal frame by some mischance perish, it simply “downloads” its essence to another body and wakes up full-grown, naked and gasping, in a birthing pool of cybernetic sludge.

Whither “naturalism” in all this? Can one be realistic about the religious intuitions of robots? Post-*Battlestar Galactica*, a certain sort

of space opera will no longer be possible: the sexless pomp of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* has been laid low by the frakking and the wobble-cam. But the interesting thing about the show as it space-hops toward its conclusion is that, for all its proclaimed engagement with post-9/11 discourse, it is actually getting freakier and more far-out by the minute. Visions are driving the plot: through seizures and weird gnostic prompts, Earth has been located, but somebody appears to have gotten there first and set off some rather large bombs. And who, for frak’s sake, is the

12th and final Cylon? Eight, Nine, Ten, and Eleven have all revealed themselves, tormented into self-awareness by a frazzled psychic broadcast of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” (clearly an error in transmission here—it should have been Queen’s “We Are the Champions”). But Twelve goes incognito.

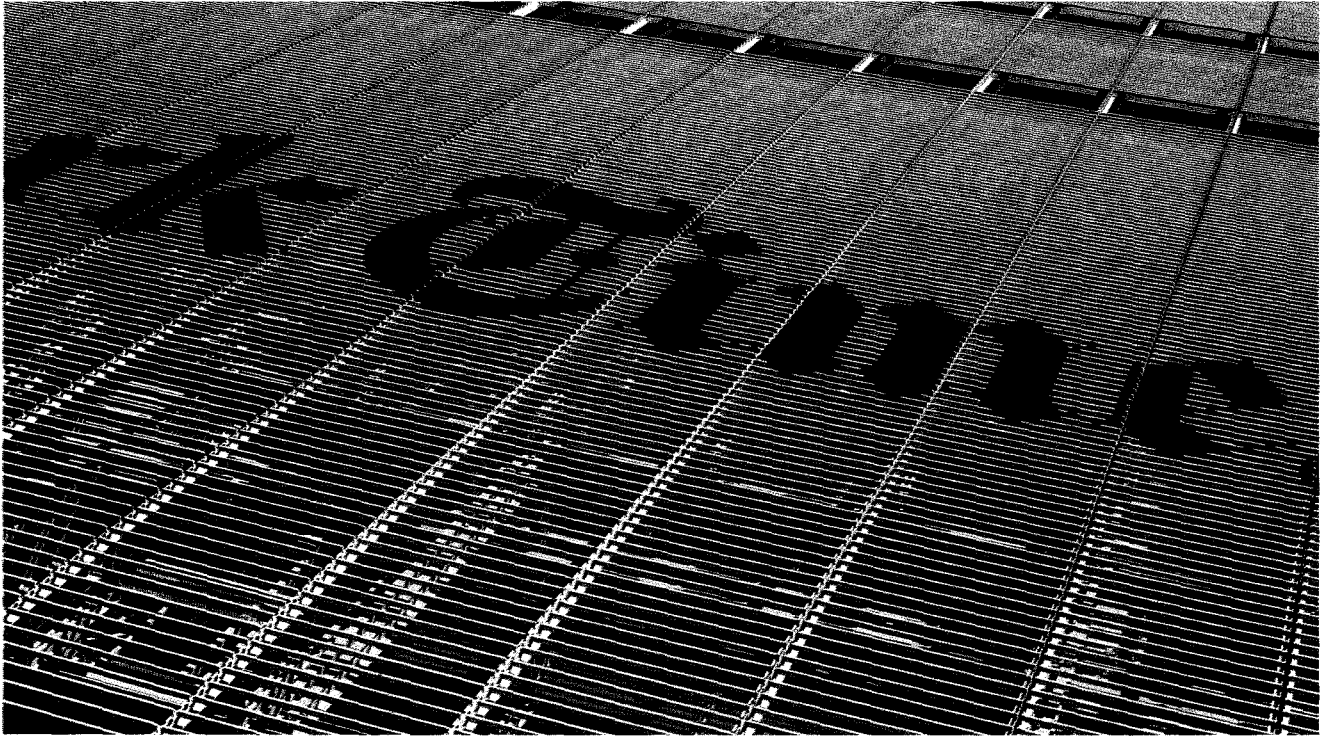
It could be Adama. It could be God. It could be Ronald D. Moore. Why not? The point is that *Battlestar Galactica* is presenting all the symptoms of an extended-run high-concept TV series in its decadent phase. An oracular mood, an obsession with identity, a sensation of multiplying meanings—it’s the paranoid style in American TV writing. A casual viewer parachuted into the final chapters of this show would be as clueless as if he’d joined David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* in the second season or J. J. Abrams’s *Lost* in the third. They start strong, these projects, on power chords of auteurist entitlement—they grip the mind, at first. Dispensed from the obligation to deliver a crisp narrative arc and a prescribed dosage of thrills with each installment, today’s TV hit-maker is riding his own wild license across the ranges of space.

But now he’s way out there, Daddy-O. Can he ever come back?

In their latter, breakdown stages, these shows become the culture’s homage to vertigo—to the suspicion that we live in a universe of surfaces, pointlessly arranged, whose invitations to depth or transcendence are all red herrings, shaggy dogs, wild goose chases, and decoy ducks. For *Battlestar Galactica*, the hunt is almost over. The finale looms; annihilation snickers outside the air lock. Time to find out whether that Snark is really a Boojum or not. What if, in the last reveal, it were to be disclosed that the human-Cylon showdown *already took place*, aeons ago, before our beetling progress toward the stars had even begun? That the Cylons are our ancestors, with their wires coiled in our DNA? Behold: he approaches, striding blindly out of a golden haze: the 12th Cylon. See his smile. Feel his heat. He has the face (surely you’ve guessed it by now) of L. Ron Hubbard. ■

James Parker is an Atlantic correspondent.

***Battlestar Galactica* aims for “naturalistic science fiction.” But can one be realistic about the religious intuitions of robots?**



End Times

Can America's paper of record survive the death of newsprint? Can journalism?

By Michael Hirschorn

VIRTUALLY ALL THE predictions about the death of old media have assumed a comfortably long time frame for the end of print—the moment when, amid a panoply of flashing lights, press conferences, and elegiac reminiscences, the newspaper presses stop rolling and news goes entirely digital. Most of these scenarios assume a gradual crossing-over, almost like the migration of dunes, as behaviors change, paradigms shift, and the digital future heaves fully into view. The thinking goes that the existing brands—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*—will be the ones making that transition, challenged but still dominant as sources of original reporting.

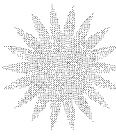
But what if the old media dies much more quickly? What if a hurricane comes along and obliterates the dunes entirely? Specifically, what if *The New York Times* goes out of business—like, this May?

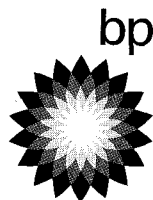
It's certainly plausible. Earnings reports released by the New York Times Company in October indicate that drastic measures will have to be taken over the next five months or the paper will default on some \$400 million in debt. With more than \$1 billion in debt already on the books, only \$46 million in cash reserves as of October, and no clear way to tap into the capital markets (the company's debt was recently reduced to junk status), the paper's future doesn't look good.

"As part of our analysis of our uses of cash, we are evaluating future financing arrangements," the Times Company

announced blandly in October, referring to the crunch it will face in May. "Based on the conversations we have had with lenders, we expect that we will be able to manage our debt and credit obligations as they mature." This prompted Henry Blodget, whose Web site, Silicon Alley Insider, has offered the smartest ongoing analysis of the company's travails, to write: "We expect that we will be able to manage? Translation: There's a possibility that we won't be able to manage."

The paper's credit crisis comes against a backdrop of ongoing and accelerating drops in circulation, massive cutbacks in advertising revenue, and the worst economic climate in almost 80 years. As of December, its stock had fallen so far that the entire company could theoretically be had for about \$1 billion. The former *Times* executive

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editor Abe Rosenthal often said he couldn't imagine a world without *The Times*. Perhaps we should start.

Granted, the odds that *The Times* will cease to exist entirely come May are relatively slim. Many steps could be taken to prolong its existence. The Times Company has already slashed its dividend, a major source of income for the paper's owners, the Sulzberger family, but one that starved the company at precisely the moment it needed significant investments in new media. The company could sell its share of the brilliant Renzo Piano-designed headquarters—which cost the company about \$600 million to build and was completed in 2007, years after the digital threat to *The Times*' core business had become clear. (It's already borrowing money against the building's value.) It could sell *The Boston Globe*—or shutter it entirely, given what the company itself has acknowledged is a challenging time for the sale of media properties. It could sell its share in the Boston Red Sox, close or sell various smaller properties, or off-load About.com, the resolutely unglamorous Web purchase that has been virtually the only source of earnings growth in the Times Company's portfolio. With these steps, or after them, would come mass staffing cuts, no matter that the executive editor, Bill Keller, promised otherwise.

It's possible that a David Geffen, Michael Bloomberg, or Carlos Slim would purchase *The Times* as a trophy property and spare the company some of this pain. Even Rupert Murdoch, after overpaying wildly for *The Wall Street Journal*, seems to be tempted by the prospect of adding *The Times* to his portfolio. But the experiences of Sam Zell, who must be ruing the day he waded into the waking nightmare that is the now-bankrupt Tribune Company, would surely temper the enthusiasm of all but the most arrogant of plutocrats. (And as global economies tumble around them, the plutocrats aren't as plutocratic as they used to be.) Alternatively, Google or Microsoft or even CBS could purchase *The Times* on the cheap, strip it for parts, and turn it into a content mill to goose its own page views.

Regardless of what happens over the next few months, *The Times* is destined for significant and traumatic change.

At some point soon—sooner than most of us think—the print edition, and with it *The Times* as we know it, will no longer exist. And it will likely have plenty of company. In December, the Fitch Ratings service, which monitors the health of media companies, predicted a widespread newspaper die-off: “Fitch believes more newspapers and newspaper groups will default, be shut down and be liquidated in 2009 and several cities could go without a daily print newspaper by 2010.”

The collapse of daily print journalism will mean many things. For those of us old enough to still care about going out on a Sunday morning for our doorstep edition of *The Times*, it will mean the end of a certain kind of civilized ritual that has defined most of our adult lives. It will also mean the end of a certain kind of quasi-bohemian urban existence for the thousands of smart middle-class writers, journalists, and public intellectuals who have, until now, lived semi-charmed kinds of lives of the mind. And it will seriously damage the press’s ability to serve as a bulwark of democracy. Internet purists may maintain that the Web will throw up a new pro-am class of citizen journalists to fill the void, but for now, at least, there’s no online substitute for institutions that can marshal years of well-developed sourcing and reporting experience—not to mention the resources to, say, send journalists leapfrogging between Mumbai and Islamabad to decode the complexities of the India-Pakistan conflict.

Most likely, the interim step for *The Times* and other newspapers will be to move to digital-only distribution (perhaps preserving the more profitable Sunday editions). Already, most readers of *The Times* are consuming it online. The Web site, nytimes.com, boasted an impressive 20 million unique users for the month of October, making it the fifth-ranked news site on the Internet in terms of total visitors. (The October numbers were boosted by interest in the election, but still ...) The print product, meanwhile, is sold to a mere million readers a day and dropping, and the Sunday print edition to 1.4 million (and also dropping). Print and Web metrics are not apples-to-apples, but it’s intuitively the case that the Web has extended *The Times’* reach many times over.

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The conundrum, of course, is that those 1 million print readers, who pay actual cash money for the privilege of consuming the paper, and who are worth about five figures a page to advertisers, are far more profitable than the 20 million unique Web users, who don't and aren't. Common estimates suggest that a Web-driven product could support only 20 percent of the current staff; such a drop in personnel would (in the short run) devastate *The Times*' news-gathering capacity.

If you're hearing few howls and seeing little rending of garments over the impending death of institutional, high-quality journalism, it's because the public at large has been trained to undervalue journalists and journalism. The Internet has done much to encourage lazy news consumption, while virtually eradicating the meaningful distinctions among newspaper brands. The story from Beijing that pops up in my Google alert could have come from anywhere. As news resources are stretched and shared, it can often appear anywhere as well: a *Los Angeles Times* piece will show up in *The Washington Post*, or vice versa.

But the business strategy of *The New York Times*, as practiced since Abe Rosenthal's editorship in the early '70s, when *New York* magazine first threatened the daily's stranglehold on the city's lumpen upper-middle class—and as imitated by countless papers around the country—has undermined the perceived value of serious newspaper journalism as well. Under the guise of "service," *The Times* has been on a steady march toward temporarily profitable lifestyle fluff. Escapes! Styles! *T* magazine(s)! For a time, this fluff helped underwrite the foreign bureaus, enterprise reporting, and endless five-part Pulitzer Prize aspirants. But it has gradually hollowed out journalism's brand, by making the newspaper feel disposable. The fluff is more fun to read than the loss-leading reports about starvation in Sudan, but it isn't the sort of thing you miss when it's gone. Not many people would get misty-eyed over the closure of, say, "Thursday Styles," fascinating as its weekly shopping deconstructions often are.

What would a post-print *Times* look like? Forced to make a Web-based strategy profitable, a reconstructed Web site

could start mixing original reportage with *Times*-endorsed reporting from other outlets with straight-up aggregation. This would allow *The Times* to continue to impose its live-from-the-Upper-West-Side brand on the world without having to literally cover every inch of it. In an optimistic scenario, the remaining reporters—now reporters-cum-bloggers, in many cases—could use their considerable savvy to mix their own reporting with that of others, giving us a more integrative, real-time view of the world unencumbered by the inefficiencies of the traditional journalistic form. *Times* readers might actually end up getting more exposure than they currently do to reporting resources scattered around the globe, and to areas and issues that are difficult to cover in a general-interest publication.

As David Remnick, the editor of *The New Yorker*, pointed out at a recent media breakfast, the blogging and local reporting from Mumbai in the early hours of the November terrorist attacks were nothing short of remarkable. Ditto in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

I recall avidly following the 2006 crisis in Lebanon through a variety of sources, none less interesting or credible because it was, say, *Haaretz* instead of *The Times*. Like neighboring hospitals coordinating their purchases of expensive MRI equipment, journalistic outlets will discover that the Web allows (okay, forces) them to concentrate on developing expertise in a narrower set of issues and interests, while helping journalists from other places and publications find new audiences.

In this scenario, *nytimes.com* would begin to resemble a bigger, better, and less partisan version of the Huffington Post, which, until someone smarter or more deep-pocketed comes along, is the prototype for the future of journalism: a healthy dose of aggregation, a wide range of contributors, and a growing offering of original reporting. This combination has allowed the HuffPo to digest the news that matters most

to its readers at minimal cost, while it focuses resources in the highest-impact areas. What the HuffPo does not have, at least not yet, is a roster of contributors who can set agendas, conduct in-depth investigations, or break high-level news. But the post-print *Times* still would.

Clearly, over the short run, there would be a culling of the journalistic herd. If 80 percent of *The Times* staff ends up laid off, many of them won't find their way to new reporting jobs. But over the long run, a world in which journalism is no longer weighed down by the need to fold an omnibus news product into a larger lifestyle-tastic package might turn out to be one in which actual reportage could make the case for why

it matters, and why it might even be worth paying for. The best journalists will survive, and eventually thrive. Some will be snapped up by an expanding HuffPo (which is raising millions while its print competitors tank) and by the inevitable competitors that will spring up to imitate its business model, or even by smaller outlets, like Talking Points Memo, which have

found that keeping their overhead low allows them to profit from high-quality journalism. And some will succeed as independent operators. Figures like Thomas Friedman, Paul Krugman, and Andrew Ross Sorkin (the editor of the DealBook business blog, which has been a cash cow for *The Times*) would be worth a great deal on the open market. For them and others, the bracing experience of becoming "brands of one" could prove intoxicating, and perhaps more profitable than fighting as part of a union for an extra percentage-point raise in their next contract.

Ultimately, the death of *The New York Times*—or at least its print edition—would be a sentimental moment, and a severe blow to American journalism. But a disaster? In the long run, maybe not. ■

Michael Hirschorn is an Atlantic contributing editor.

A world in which the news is no longer folded into a larger lifestyle-tastic package might be one in which real journalism could make the case for why it matters.

FEATURES

“As a purely demographic matter, ‘white America’ may cease to exist in 2040, 2050, or 2060, or later still. But where the culture is concerned, it’s already all but finished.”

—HUA HSU

from “The End of White America,” beginning on page 46

What will it mean to be white when whiteness is no longer the norm?
And will a post-white America be less racially divided—or more so?

THE END OF WHITE AMERICA?

Hua Hsu

ILLUSTRATIONS BY FELIX SOCKWELL

CIVILIZATION'S GOING TO PIECES," he remarks. He is in polite company, gathered with friends around a bottle of wine in the late-afternoon sun, chatting and gossiping. "I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read *The Rise of the Colored Empires* by this man Goddard?" They hadn't. "Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's proved."

He is Tom Buchanan, a character in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a man who is so sure of himself that nearly everyone who passes through the American education system is



“scientific.” And the book was hardly a fringe phenomenon. It was published by Scribner, also Fitzgerald’s publisher, and Stoddard, who received a doctorate in history from Harvard, was a member of many professional academic associations. It was precisely the kind of book that a 1920s man of Buchanan’s profile—wealthy, Ivy League-educated, at once pretentious and intellectually insecure—might have been expected to bring up in casual conversation.

As white men of comfort and privilege living in an age of limited social mobility, of course, Stoddard and the Buchanans in his audience had nothing literal to fear. Their sense of dread hovered somewhere above the concerns of everyday life. It was linked less to any immediate danger to their class’s political and cultural power than to the perceived fraying of the fixed, monolithic identity of whiteness that sewed together the fortunes of the fair-skinned.

From the hysteria over Eastern European immigration to the vibrant cultural miscegenation of the Harlem Renaissance, it is easy to see how this imagined worldwide white kinship might have seemed imperiled in the 1920s. There’s no better example of the era’s insecurities than the 1923 Supreme Court case *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, in which an Indian American veteran of World War I sought to become a naturalized citizen by proving that he was Caucasian. The Court considered new anthropological studies that expanded the definition of the Caucasian race to include Indians, and the justices even agreed that traces of “Aryan blood” coursed through Thind’s body. But these technicalities availed him little. The Court determined that Thind was not white “in accordance with the understanding of the common man” and therefore could be excluded from the “statutory category” of whiteness. Put another way: Thind was white, in that he was Caucasian and even Aryan. But he was not *white* in the way Stoddard or Buchanan were white.

The ‘20s debate over the definition of whiteness—a legal category? a commonsense understanding? a worldwide civilization?—took place in a society gripped by an acute sense of racial paranoia, and it is easy to regard these episodes as evidence of how far we have come. But consider that these anxieties surfaced when whiteness was synonymous with the American mainstream, when threats to its status were largely imaginary. What happens once this is no longer the case—when the fears of Lothrop Stoddard and Tom Buchanan are realized, and white people actually become an American minority?

Whether you describe it as the dawning of a post-racial age or just the end of white America, we’re approaching a profound demographic tipping point. According to an August 2008 report by the U.S. Census Bureau, those groups currently categorized as racial minorities—blacks and Hispanics, East Asians and South Asians—will account for a majority of the U.S. population by the year 2042. Among Americans

under the age of 18, this shift is projected to take place in 2023, which means that every child born in the United States from here on out will belong to the first post-white generation.

Obviously, steadily ascending rates of interracial marriage complicate this picture, pointing toward what Michael Lind has described as the “beiging” of America. And it’s possible that “beige Americans” will self-identify as “white” in sufficient numbers to push the tipping point further into the future than the Census Bureau projects. But even if they do, whiteness will be a label adopted out of convenience and even indifference, rather than aspiration and necessity. For an earlier generation of minorities and immigrants, to be recognized as a “white American,” whether you were an Italian or a Pole or a Hungarian, was to enter the mainstream

of American life; to be recognized as something else, as the *Thind* case suggests, was to be permanently excluded. As Bill Imada, head of the IW Group, a prominent Asian American communications and marketing company, puts it: “I think in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, [for] anyone who immigrated, the aspiration was to blend in and be as American as possible so that white America wouldn’t be intimidated by them. They wanted to imitate white America as much as possible: learn English, go to church, go to the same schools.”

Today, the picture is far more complex. To take the most obvious

example, whiteness is no longer a precondition for entry into the highest levels of public office. The son of Indian immigrants doesn’t have to become “white” in order to be elected governor of Louisiana. A half-Kenyan, half-Kansan politician can self-identify as black and be elected president of the United States.

As a purely demographic matter, then, the “white America” that Lothrop Stoddard believed in so fervently may cease to exist in 2040, 2050, or 2060, or later still. But where the culture is concerned, it’s already all but finished. Instead of the long-standing model of assimilation toward a common center, the culture is being remade in the image of white America’s multiethnic, multicolored heirs.

For some, the disappearance of this centrifugal core heralds a future rich with promise. In 1998, President Bill Clinton, in a now-famous address to students at Portland State University, remarked:

Today, largely because of immigration, there is no majority race in Hawaii or Houston or New York City. Within five years, there will be no majority race in our largest state, California. In a little more than 50 years, there will be no majority race in the United States. No other nation in history has gone through demographic change of this magnitude in so short a time ... [These immigrants] are energizing our culture and broadening our vision of the world. They are renewing our most basic values and reminding us all of what it truly means to be American.



Not everyone was so enthused. Clinton's remarks caught the attention of another anxious Buchanan—Pat Buchanan, the conservative thinker. Revisiting the president's speech in his 2001 book, *The Death of the West*, Buchanan wrote: "Mr. Clinton assured us that it will be a better America when we are all minorities and realize true 'diversity.' Well, those students [at Portland State] are going to find out, for they will spend their golden years in a Third World America."

Today, the arrival of what Buchanan derided as "Third World America" is all but inevitable. What will the new mainstream of America look like, and what ideas or values might it rally around? What will it mean to be white after "whiteness" no longer defines the mainstream? Will anyone mourn the end of white America? Will anyone try to preserve it?

ANOTHER MOMENT FROM *The Great Gatsby*: as Fitzgerald's narrator and Gatsby drive across the Queensboro Bridge into Manhattan, a car passes them, and Nick Carraway notices that it is a limousine "driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl." The novelty of this topsy-turvy arrangement inspires Carraway to laugh aloud and think to himself, "Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge, anything at all..."

For a contemporary embodiment of the upheaval that this scene portended, consider Sean Combs, a hip-hop mogul and one of the most famous African Americans on the planet. Combs grew up during hip-hop's late-1970s rise, and he belongs to the first generation that could safely make a living working in the industry—as a plucky young promoter and record-label intern in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and as a fashion designer, artist, and music executive worth hundreds of millions of dollars a brief decade later.

In the late 1990s, Combs made a fascinating gesture toward New York's high society. He announced his arrival into the circles of the rich and powerful not by crashing their parties, but by inviting them into his own spectacularly over-the-top world. Combs began to stage elaborate annual parties in the Hamptons, not far from where Fitzgerald's novel takes place. These "white parties"—attendees are required to wear white—quickly became legendary for their opulence (in 2004, Combs showcased a 1776 copy of the Declaration of Independence) as well as for the cultures-colliding quality of Hamptons elites paying their respects to someone so comfortably nouveau riche. Prospective business partners angled to get close to him and praised him as a guru of the lucrative "urban" market, while grateful partygoers hailed him as a modern-day Gatsby.

"Have I read *The Great Gatsby*?" Combs said to a London newspaper in 2001. "I am the Great Gatsby."

Yet whereas Gatsby felt pressure to hide his status as an arriviste, Combs celebrated his position as an outsider-insider—someone who appropriates elements of the culture he seeks to join without attempting to assimilate outright. In a sense, Combs was imitating the old WASP establishment; in another sense, he was subtly provoking it, by over-enunciating its formality and never letting his guests forget that there was

something slightly off about his presence. There's a silent power to throwing parties where the best-dressed man in the room is also the one whose public profile once consisted primarily of dancing in the background of Biggie Smalls videos. ("No one would ever expect a young black man to be coming to a party with the Declaration of Independence, but I got it, and it's coming with me," Combs joked at his 2004 party, as he made the rounds with the document, promising not to spill champagne on it.)

In this regard, Combs is both a product and a hero of the new cultural mainstream, which prizes diversity above all else, and whose ultimate goal is some vague notion of racial transcendence, rather than subversion or assimilation. Although Combs's vision is far from representative—not many hip-hop stars vacation in St. Tropez with a parasol-toting manservant shading their every step—his industry lies at the heart of this new mainstream. Over the past 30 years, few changes in American culture have been as significant as the rise of hip-hop. The genre has radically reshaped the way we listen to and consume music, first by opposing the pop mainstream and then by becoming it. From its constant sampling of past styles and eras—old records, fashions, slang, anything—to its mythologization of the self-made black antihero, hip-hop is more than a musical genre: it's a philosophy, a political statement, a way of approaching and remaking culture. It's a lingua franca not just among kids in America, but also among young people worldwide. And its economic impact extends beyond the music industry, to fashion, advertising, and film. (Consider the producer Russell Simmons—the ur-Combs and a music, fashion, and television mogul—or the rapper 50 Cent, who has parlayed his rags-to-riches story line into extracurricular successes that include a clothing line; book, video-game, and film deals; and a startlingly lucrative partnership with the makers of Vitamin Water.)

But hip-hop's deepest impact is symbolic. During popular music's rise in the 20th century, white artists and producers consistently "mainstreamed" African American innovations. Hip-hop's ascension has been different. Eminem notwithstanding, hip-hop never suffered through anything like an Elvis Presley moment, in which a white artist made a musical form safe for white America. This is no dig at Elvis—the constrictive racial logic of the 1950s demanded the erasure of rock and roll's black roots, and if it hadn't been him, it would have been someone else. But hip-hop—the sound of the post-civil-rights, post-soul generation—found a global audience on its own terms.

Today, hip-hop's colonization of the global imagination, from fashion runways in Europe to dance competitions in Asia, is Disney-esque. This transformation has bred an unprecedented cultural confidence in its black originators. Whiteness is no longer a threat, or an ideal: it's kitsch to be appropriated, whether with gestures like Combs's "white parties" or the trickle-down epidemic of collared shirts and cuff links currently afflicting rappers. And an expansive multiculturalism is replacing the us-against-the-world bunker mentality that lent a thrilling edge to hip-hop's mid-1990s rise.

Peter Rosenberg, a self-proclaimed "nerdy Jewish kid" and radio personality on New York's Hot 97 FM—and a living

example of how hip-hop has created new identities for its listeners that don't fall neatly along lines of black and white—shares another example: “I interviewed [the St. Louis rapper] Nelly this morning, and he said it's now very cool and *in* to have multicultural friends. Like you're not really considered hip or 'you've made it' if you're rolling with all the same people.”

Just as Tiger Woods forever changed the country-club culture of golf, and Will Smith confounded stereotypes about the ideal Hollywood leading man, hip-hop's rise is helping redefine the American mainstream, which no longer aspires toward a single iconic image of style or class. Successful network-television shows like *Lost*, *Heroes*, and *Grey's Anatomy* feature wildly diverse casts, and an entire genre of half-hour comedy, from *The Colbert Report* to *The Office*, seems dedicated to having fun with the persona of the clueless white male. The youth market is following the same pattern: consider the Cheetah Girls, a multicultural, multiplatinum, multiplatform trio of teenyboppers who recently starred in their third movie, or Dora the Explorer, the precocious bilingual 7-year-old Latina adventurer who is arguably the most successful animated character on children's television today. In a recent address to the Association of Hispanic Advertising Agencies, Brown Johnson, the Nickelodeon executive who has overseen Dora's rise, explained the importance of creating a character who does not conform to “the white, middle-class mold.” When Johnson pointed out that Dora's wares were outselling Barbie's in France, the crowd hooted in delight.

Pop culture today rallies around an ethic of multicultural inclusion that seems to value every identity—except whiteness. “It's become harder for the blond-haired, blue-eyed commercial actor,” remarks Rochelle Newman-Carrasco, of the Hispanic marketing firm Enlace. “You read casting notices, and they like to cast people with brown hair because they could be Hispanic. The language of casting notices is pretty shocking because it's so specific: ‘Brown hair, brown eyes, could look Hispanic.’ Or, as one notice put it: ‘Ethnically ambiguous.’”

“I think white people feel like they're under siege right now—like it's not okay to be white right now, especially if you're a white male,” laughs Bill Imada, of the IW Group. Imada and Newman-Carrasco are part of a movement within advertising, marketing, and communications firms to reimagine the profile of the typical American consumer. (Tellingly, every person I spoke with from these industries knew the Census Bureau's projections by heart.)

“There's a lot of fear and a lot of resentment,” Newman-Carrasco observes, describing the flak she caught after writing an article for a trade publication on the need for more-diverse hiring practices. “I got a response from a friend—he's, like, a 60-something white male, and he's been involved with multicultural recruiting,” she recalls. “And he said, ‘I really feel like the hunted. It's a hard time to be a

white man in America right now, because I feel like I'm being lumped in with all white males in America, and I've tried to do stuff, but it's a tough time.’”

“I always tell the white men in the room, ‘We need you,’” Imada says. “We cannot talk about diversity and inclusion and engagement without you at the table. It's okay to be white!

“But people are stressed out about it. ‘We used to be in control! We're losing control!’”

IF THEY'RE RIGHT—if white America is indeed “losing control,” and if the future will belong to people who can successfully navigate a post-racial, multicultural landscape—then it's no surprise that many white Americans are eager to divest themselves of their whiteness entirely.

For some, this renunciation can take a radical form. In 1994, a young graffiti artist and activist named William “Upski” Wimsatt, the son of a university professor, published *Bomb the Suburbs*, the spiritual heir to Norman Mailer's celebratory 1957 essay, “The White Negro.” Wimsatt was deeply committed to hip-hop's transformative powers, going so far as to embrace the status of the lowly “wigger,” a pejorative term popularized in the early 1990s to describe white kids who steep themselves in black culture. Wimsatt viewed the wigger's immersion in two cultures as an engine for change. “If channeled in the right way,” he wrote, “the wigger can go a long way toward repairing the sickness of race in America.”

Wimsatt's painfully earnest attempts to put his own relationship with whiteness under the microscope coincided with the emergence of an academic discipline known as “whiteness studies.” In colleges and universities across the country, scholars began examining the history of “whiteness” and unpacking its contradictions. Why, for example, had the Irish and the Italians fallen beyond the pale at different moments in our history? Were Jewish Americans *white*? And, as the historian Matthew Frye Jacobson asked, “Why is it that in the United States, a white woman can have black children but a black woman cannot have white children?”

Much like Wimsatt, the whiteness-studies academics—figures such as Jacobson, David Roediger, Eric Lott, and Noel Ignatiev—were attempting to come to terms with their own relationships with whiteness, in its past and present forms. In the early 1990s, Ignatiev, a former labor activist and the author of *How the Irish Became White*, set out to “abolish” the idea of the white race by starting the New Abolitionist Movement and founding a journal titled *Race Traitor*. “There is nothing positive about white identity,” he wrote in 1998. “As James Baldwin said, ‘As long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you.’”

Although most white Americans haven't read *Bomb the Suburbs* or *Race Traitor*, this view of whiteness as something to be interrogated, if not shrugged off completely, has migrated to less academic spheres. The perspective of the

One sociologist observes that his white students are plagued by a racial-identity crisis. “They care about culture. And to be white is to be culturally broke.”



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whiteness-studies academics is commonplace now, even if the language used to express it is different.

"I get it: as a straight white male, I'm the worst thing on Earth," Christian Lander says. Lander is a Canadian-born, Los Angeles-based satirist who in January 2008 started a blog called *Stuff White People Like* (stuffwhitepeoplelike.com), which pokes fun at the manners and mores of a specific species of young, hip, upwardly mobile whites. (He has written more than 100 entries about whites' passion for things like bottled water, "the idea of soccer," and "being the only white person around.") At its best, Lander's site—which formed the basis for a recently published book of the same name (reviewed in the October 2008 *Atlantic*)—is a cunningly precise distillation of the identity crisis plaguing well-meaning, well-off white kids in a post-white world.

"Like, I'm aware of all the horrible crimes that my demographic has done in the world," Lander says. "And there's a bunch of white people who are desperate—*desperate*—to say, 'You know what? My skin's white, but I'm not one of the white people who's destroying the world.'"

For Lander, whiteness has become a vacuum. The "white identity" he limns on his blog is predicated on the quest for authenticity—usually other people's authenticity. "As a white person, you're just desperate to find something else to grab onto. You're jealous! Pretty much every white person I grew up with wished they'd grown up in, you know, an ethnic home that gave them a second language. White culture is *Family Ties* and Led Zeppelin and Guns N' Roses—like, this is white culture. This is all we have."

Lander's "white people" are products of a very specific historical moment, raised by well-meaning Baby Boomers to reject the old ideal of white American gentility and to embrace diversity and fluidity instead. ("It's strange that we are the kids of Baby Boomers, right? How the hell do you rebel against that? Like, your parents will march against the World Trade Organization next to you. They'll have bigger white dreadlocks than you. What do you do?") But his lighthearted anthropology suggests that the multicultural harmony they were raised to worship has bred a kind of self-denial.

Matt Wray, a sociologist at Temple University who is a fan of Lander's humor, has observed that many of his white students are plagued by a racial-identity crisis: "They don't care about socioeconomics; they care about culture. And to be white is to be culturally broke. The classic thing white students say when you ask them to talk about who they are is, 'I don't have a culture.' They might be privileged, they might be loaded socioeconomically, but they feel bankrupt when it comes to culture ... They feel disadvantaged, and they feel marginalized. They don't have a culture that's cool or oppositional." Wray says that this feeling of being culturally bereft often prevents students from recognizing what it means to be a child of privilege—a strange irony that the first wave of whiteness-studies scholars, in the 1990s, failed to anticipate.

Of course, the obvious material advantages that come with being born white—lower infant-mortality rates and easier-to-acquire bank loans, for example—tend to undercut any sympathy that this sense of marginalization might generate. And in the right context, cultural-identity crises can turn well-meaning whites into instant punch lines. Consider *ego trip's*

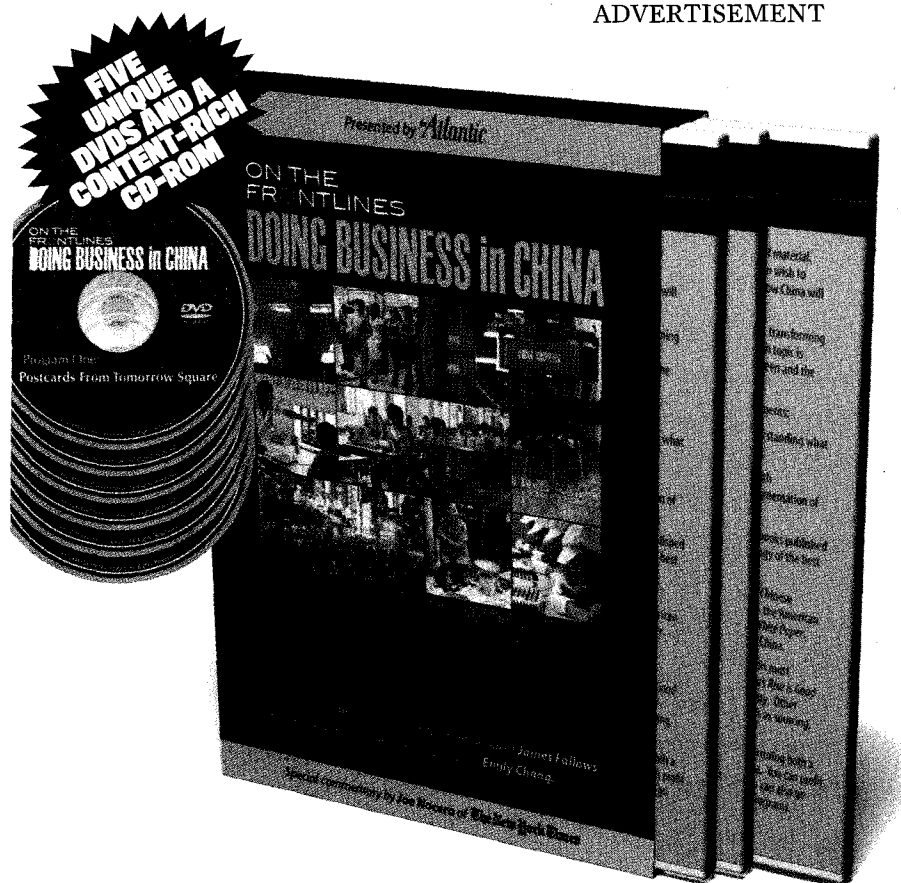
The (White) Rapper Show, a brilliant and critically acclaimed reality show that VH1 debuted in 2007. It depicted 10 (mostly hapless) white rappers living together in a dilapidated house—dubbed "Tha White House"—in the South Bronx. Despite the contestants' best intentions, each one seemed like a profoundly confused caricature, whether it was the solemn graduate student committed to fighting racism or the ghetto-obsessed suburbanite who had, seemingly by accident, named himself after the abolitionist John Brown.

Similarly, Smirnoff struck marketing gold in 2006 with a viral music video titled "Tea Partay," featuring a trio of strikingly bad, V-neck-sweater-clad white rappers called the Prep Unit. "Haters like to clown our Ivy League educations / But they're just jealous 'cause our families run the nation," the trio brayed, as a pair of bottle-blond women in spiffy tennis whites shimmied behind them. There was no nonironic way to enjoy the video; its entire appeal was in its self-aware lampooning of WASP culture: verdant country clubs, "old money," croquet, popped collars, and the like.

"The best defense is to be constantly pulling the rug out from underneath yourself," Wray remarks, describing the way self-aware whites contend with their complicated identity. "Beat people to the punch. You're forced as a white person into a sense of ironic detachment. Irony is what fuels a lot of white subcultures. You also see things like Burning Man, when a lot of white people are going into the desert and trying to invent something that is entirely new and not a form of racial mimicry. That's its own kind of flight from whiteness. We're going through a period where whites are really trying to figure out: Who are we?"

THE "FLIGHT FROM WHITENESS" of urban, college-educated, liberal whites isn't the only attempt to answer this question. You can flee into whiteness as well. This can mean pursuing the authenticity of an imagined past: think of the deliberately white-bread world of Mormon America, where the '50s never ended, or the anachronistic WASP entitlement flaunted in books like last year's *A Privileged Life: Celebrating WASP Style*, a handsome coffee-table book compiled by Susanna Salk, depicting a world of seersucker blazers, whale pants, and deck shoes. (What the book celebrates is the "inability to be outdone," and the "self-confidence and security that comes with it," Salk tells me. "That's why I call it 'privilege.' It's this privilege of time, of heritage, of being in a place longer than anybody else.") But these enclaves of preserved-in-amber whiteness are likely to be less important to the American future than the construction of whiteness as a somewhat pissed-off minority culture.

This notion of a self-consciously white expression of minority empowerment will be familiar to anyone who has come across the comedian Larry the Cable Guy—he of "Farting Jingle Bells"—or witnessed the transformation of Detroit-born-and-bred Kid Rock from teenage rapper into "American Bad Ass" southern-style rocker. The 1990s may have been a decade when multiculturalism advanced dramatically—when American culture became "colorized," as the critic Jeff Chang put it—but it was also an era when a very different form of identity politics crystallized. Hip-hop



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may have provided the decade's soundtrack, but the highest-selling artist of the '90s was Garth Brooks. Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods may have been the faces of athletic superstardom, but it was NASCAR that emerged as professional sports' fastest-growing institution, with ratings second only to the NFL's.

As with the unexpected success of the apocalyptic Left Behind novels, or the Jeff Foxworthy-organized Blue Collar Comedy Tour, the rise of country music and auto racing took place well off the American elite's radar screen. (None of Christian Lander's white people would be caught dead at a NASCAR race.) These phenomena reflected a growing sense of cultural solidarity among lower-middle-class whites—a solidarity defined by a yearning for American “authenticity,” a folksy realness that rejects the global, the urban, and the effete in favor of nostalgia for “the way things used to be.”

Like other forms of identity politics, white solidarity comes complete with its own folk heroes, conspiracy theories (Barack Obama is a secret Muslim! The U.S. is going to merge with Canada and Mexico!), and laundry lists of injustices. The targets and scapegoats vary—from multiculturalism and affirmative action to a loss of moral values, from immigration to an economy that no longer guarantees the American worker a fair chance—and so do the political programs they inspire. (Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan both tapped into this white identity politics in the 1990s; today, its tribunes run the ideological gamut, from Jim Webb to Ron Paul to Mike Huckabee to Sarah Palin.) But the core grievance, in each case, has to do with cultural and socioeconomic dislocation—the sense that the system that used to guarantee the white working class some stability has gone off-kilter.

Wray is one of the founders of what has been called “white-trash studies,” a field conceived as a response to the perceived elite-liberal marginalization of the white working class. He argues that the economic downturn of the 1970s was the precondition for the formation of an “oppositional” and “defiant” white-working-class sensibility—think of the rugged, anti-everything individualism of 1977's *Smokey and the Bandit*. But those anxieties took their shape from the aftershocks of the identity-based movements of the 1960s. “I think that the political space that the civil-rights movement opens up in the mid-1950s and '60s is the transformative thing,” Wray observes. “Following the black-power movement, all of the other minority groups that followed took up various forms of activism, including brown power and yellow power and red power. Of course the problem is, if you try and have a ‘white power’ movement, it doesn't sound good.”

The result is a racial pride that dares not speak its name, and that defines itself through cultural cues instead—a suspicion of intellectual elites and city dwellers, a preference for folksiness and plainness of speech (whether real or feigned), and the association of a working-class white minority with “the real America.” (In the Scots-Irish belt that runs from Arkansas up through West Virginia, the most

common ethnic label offered to census takers is “American.”) Arguably, this white identity politics helped swing the 2000 and 2004 elections, serving as the powerful counterpunch to urban white liberals, and the McCain-Palin campaign relied on it almost to the point of absurdity (as when a McCain surrogate dismissed Northern Virginia as somehow not part of “the real Virginia”) as a bulwark against the threatening multiculturalism of Barack Obama. Their strategy failed, of course, but it's possible to imagine white identity politics

growing more potent and more forthright in its racial identifications in the future, as “the real America” becomes an ever-smaller portion of, well, the real America, and as the soon-to-be white minority's sense of being besieged and disdained by a multicultural majority grows apace.

This vision of the aggrieved white man lost in a world that no longer values him was given its most vivid expression in the 1993 film *Falling Down*. Michael Douglas plays Bill Foster, a downsized defense worker with a buzz cut and a pocket protector who rampages through a Los Angeles overrun by greedy Korean shop-owners and Hispanic gangsters, railing against the eclipse of the America he used to know. (The film came out

just eight years before California became the nation's first majority-minority state.) *Falling Down* ends with a soulful police officer apprehending Foster on the Santa Monica Pier, at which point the middle-class vigilante asks, almost innocently: “I'm the bad guy?”

BUT THIS IS a nightmare vision. Of course most of America's Bill Fosters aren't the bad guys—just as civilization is not, in the words of Tom Buchanan, “going to pieces” and America is not, in the phrasing of Pat Buchanan, going “Third World.” The coming white minority does not mean that the racial hierarchy of American culture will suddenly become inverted, as in 1995's *White Man's Burden*, an awful thought experiment of a film, starring John Travolta, that envisions an upside-down world in which whites are subjugated to their high-class black oppressors. There will be dislocations and resentments along the way, but the demographic shifts of the next 40 years are likely to reduce the power of racial hierarchies over everyone's lives, producing a culture that's more likely than any before to treat its inhabitants as individuals, rather than members of a caste or identity group.

Consider the world of advertising and marketing, industries that set out to mold our desires at a subconscious level. Advertising strategy once assumed a “general market”—“a code word for ‘white people,’” jokes one ad executive—and smaller, mutually exclusive, satellite “ethnic markets.” In recent years, though, advertisers have begun revising their assumptions and strategies in anticipation of profound demographic shifts. Instead of herding consumers toward a discrete center, the goal today is to create versatile images and campaigns that can be adapted to highly individualized tastes. (Think of the dancing silhouettes in Apple's iPod campaign,

One can imagine white identity politics growing more potent and forthright as the soon-to-be white minority's sense of being besieged and disdained increases.

which emphasizes individuality and diversity without privileging—or even representing—any specific group.)

At the moment, we can call this the triumph of multiculturalism, or post-racialism. But just as *whiteness* has no inherent meaning—it is a vessel we fill with our hopes and anxieties—these terms may prove equally empty in the long run. Does being post-racial mean that we are past race completely, or merely that race is no longer essential to how we identify ourselves? Karl Carter, of Atlanta's youth-oriented GTM Inc. (Guerrilla Tactics Media), suggests that marketers and advertisers would be better off focusing on matrices like "lifestyle" or "culture" rather than race or ethnicity. "You'll have crazy in-depth studies of the white consumer or the Latino consumer," he complains. "But how do skaters feel? How do hip-hoppers feel?"

The logic of online social networking points in a similar direction. The New York University sociologist Dalton Conley has written of a "network nation," in which applications like Facebook and MySpace create "crosscutting social groups" and new, flexible identities that only vaguely overlap with racial identities. Perhaps this is where the future of identity after whiteness lies—in a dramatic departure from the racial logic that has defined American culture from the very beginning. What Conley, Carter, and others are describing isn't merely the displacement of whiteness from our cultural center; they're describing a social structure that treats race as just one of a seemingly infinite number of possible self-identifications.

The problem of the 20th century, W. E. B. DuBois famously predicted, would be the problem of the color line. Will this continue to be the case in the 21st century, when a black president will govern a country whose social networks increasingly cut across every conceivable line of identification? The ruling of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* no longer holds weight, but its echoes have been inescapable: we aspire to be post-racial, but we still live within the structures of privilege, injustice, and racial categorization that we inherited from an older order. We can talk about defining ourselves by lifestyle rather than skin color, but our lifestyle choices are still

GALLERY TRANSPLANT by Guy Billout

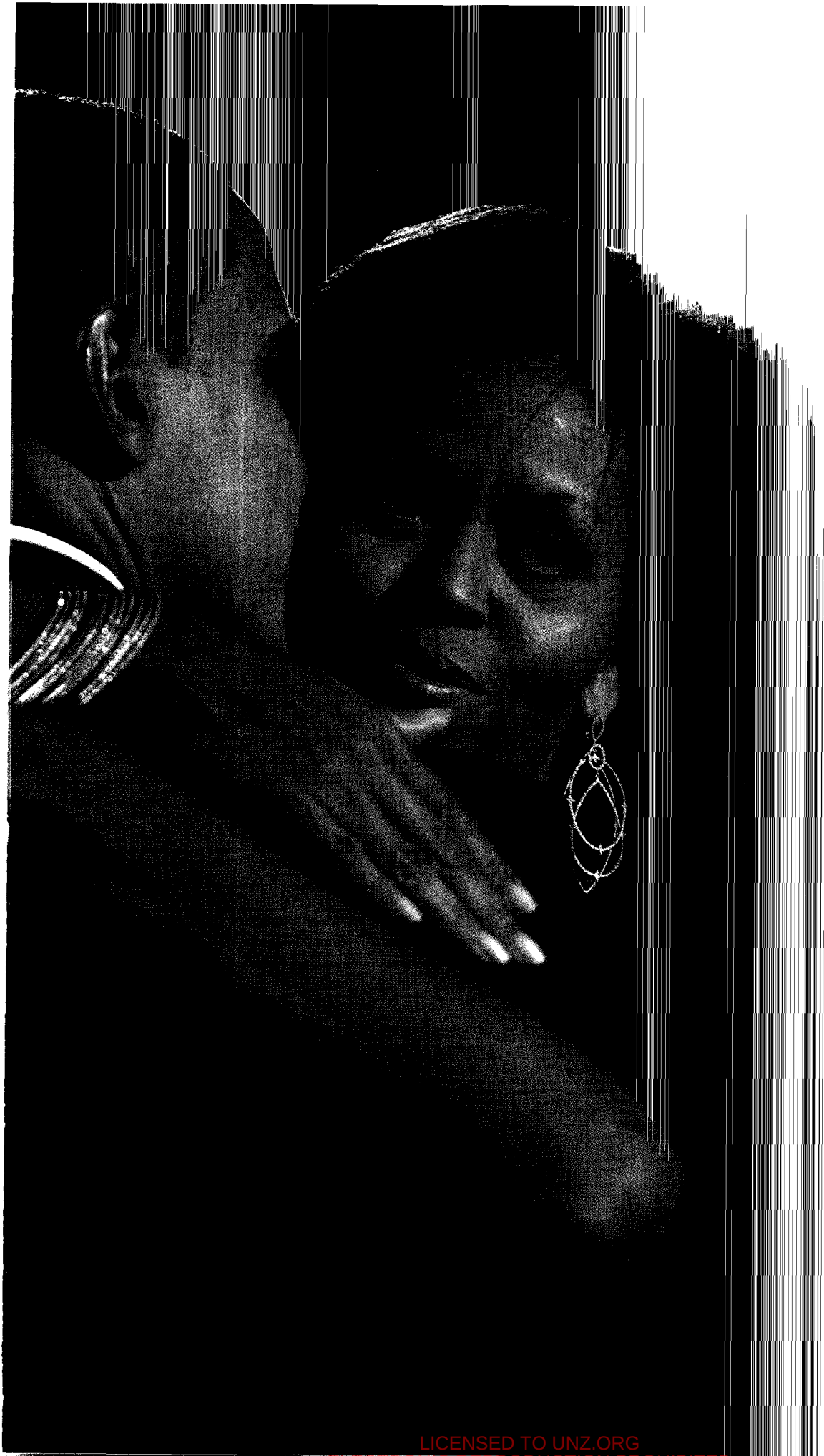


racially coded. We know, more or less, that race is a fiction that often does more harm than good, and yet it is something we cling to without fully understanding why—as a social and legal fact, a vague sense of belonging and place that we make solid through culture and speech.

But maybe this is merely how it used to be—maybe this is already an outdated way of looking at things. "You have a lot of young adults going into a more diverse world," Carter remarks. For the young Americans born in the 1980s and 1990s, culture is something to be taken apart and remade in their own image. "We came along in a generation that didn't have to follow that path of race," he goes on. "We saw something *different*." This moment was not the end of white America; it was not the end of anything. It was a bridge, and we crossed it. ■

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AMERICAN



"For the first time in my adult life," she had told a Milwaukee rally, "I am proud of my country, because it feels like hope is finally making a comeback." When I first saw that clip, I could almost hear the trapdoor opening. In that instant, Michelle Obama became a symbol of her husband's otherness. And for much of the rest of the campaign season, the opinion media obsessed over her love—or lack of love—of country.

Now, waiting in that cavernous downtown Hilton ballroom, I did not think I'd find Ida Wells or Stokely Carmichael. I did not expect to see Michelle Obama with her fist in the air, slinging bean pies, or hawking *The Final Call*. But still, I was unprepared for what I did encounter: Michelle Obama recounting her life as if she were an old stevedore hungering for the long-lost neighborhood of yore.

"I am always amazed at how different things are now for working women and families than when I was growing up," Obama told the crowd. "Things have changed just in that short period of time. See, when I was growing up, my father—as you know, a blue-collar worker—was able to go to work and earn enough money to support a family of four, while my mom stayed home with me and my brother. But today, living with one income, like we did, just doesn't cut it. People can't do it—particularly if it's a shift worker's salary like my father's."

In all my years of watching black public figures, I'd never heard one recall such an idyllic youth. Bill Cosby once said, "African Americans are the only people who do not have any good ol' days," and for years the rule was that all our bios must play on a dream deferred, must offer a nod to dilapidated public housing and mothers scrubbing white women's floors. But Obama waved off Richard Wright. Instead, the blues she sang was the ballad for the modern woman.

"I'm a working woman. I'm a daughter. I'm a sister. I'm a best friend. But the one role that I cherish the most that you've come to know is that role of mom," she told the audience. "On the campaign trail, in a fund-raiser, sitting in the back of a van somewhere, I am worried about how my girls are doing, about their well-being, about their stability."

Here was a black woman who minored in African American studies, whose home turf had been marked by the Blackstone Rangers and Gangster Disciples, casting her story not as an essay on the illusory nature of the American dream but as a rumination about our collective fall from motherhood, Chevrolet, and a chicken in every pot. I was waiting on slave narratives and oppression. I was looking for justice and the plight of the poor. Instead, I got homilies on the sainted place of women in American society. I got Michelle saluting and then ribbing her mother, who was seated in the audience. I left that ballroom thinking—as always—of the DuBoisian veil, the dark filter through which African Americans view their countrymen, and mulling the split perceptions of Michelle Obama. For all her spinning-out of a quintessential Horatio Alger tale, remixing black America into another ethnic group on the come-up, many Americans saw her largely through the prism of her belated, and wanting, expression of American pride.

There has been much chatter about Barack Obama as the answer to America's racial gap, as a biracial black man whose roots stretch from Hawaii to Kenya, with an Ivy

League pedigree and the seal of the South Side. But he is not the only one entering the White House who has seen both sides, who intuitively grasps the heroic American narrative of work ethic and family, and how that narrative historically failed black people. He is not the only one who walks in both worlds. Indeed, if you're looking for a bridge, if you're looking for someone to connect the heart of black America with the heart of all of America, to allow us all to look at the American dream in the same way, if you're looking for common ground, then it's true, we should be talking about Obama. But we should make sure we're talking about the right one.

THE ESSENTIAL AMERICANNES of Michelle Obama is rooted in her home, the South Side of Chicago. What I originally knew of the South Side I had gleaned from my college years at Howard University. It was the mid-'90s, and all of us sported some measure of black pride—be it Afrocentric or ghettocentric. Often it was a mix of the two. But the South Side kids didn't boast about rep or whose 'hood was harder. They did not make a scene like the dudes from New York. Instead, they played the South Side rapper Common's *Resurrection* until the CD skipped, and walked around campus with their chins in the air, as if they knew something we didn't. The girls from Chicago were intoxicating—maybe it was the cadences of the South that still clung to their words, or their appreciation for Sam Cooke and Al Green. Ten years ago, I chose my partner from among that lot. Though she spurned her hometown, and the South Side particularly, as a cradle of bougie Negroes, her ties to that magical city still pulled me in.

A few weeks after I saw Obama in Chicago, I came back to town, pushing a white rental through the byways of the South Side. My guide was Timuel Black, 90 years old, who'd fought in World War II, helped bring Martin Luther King Jr. to the city, and, in his later years, turned to compiling an oral history of the Great Migration. A slight, energetic man with a gray mustache, he stepped into the car wearing a blue Obama/Biden hat, and we were off. For three hours, we followed the map of his memories across the South Side, down Cottage Grove, across Hyde Park Boulevard, down through Michelle's old neighborhood of

South Shore. Black was 7 when he saw Charles Lindbergh parading down Grand Boulevard, later rechristened Martin Luther King Jr. Drive. He pointed out Joe Louis's home, and black Chicago's old commercial district, the Stroll, where he'd seen all the jazz acts.

The South Side's sheer mass and its shifting character astonished me. Bungalows would give way to mansions, mansions to burned-out lots, and at every gas station, panhandlers waited in search of change. I asked Black if he, or his brethren, thought of the South Side as a ghetto, and he shook his head, noting that it had always been filled with people like him and his parents, people who worked.

Like its New York counterparts—Harlem in Manhattan, Jamaica in Queens, and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn—the South Side is a black island in a mostly white city. But if the South Side were an island, it would be huge. Unlike Harlem,

MORE ONLINE

For a video interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates about Michelle Obama, visit www.theatlantic.com/michelle.
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That promise of a better life drew Michelle Obama's grandparents out of the South and into Chicago. Within Chicago's Black Belt—a network of neighborhoods kept segregated by Chicago's restrictive housing covenants—was the sort of

But the hardship forged values in Robinson that she passed on to her kids. “That’s where we got our understanding that it was going to be hard, but you just had to do whatever it takes,” she said. “We all went to church. I was a Brownie. I was a Girl Scout. We all took piano lessons. We had drama classes. They took you to the museum, the Art Institute. They did all those things, but I don’t know how. I grew up with a grandmother and an aunt. My aunt would do things my mother would not or could not.”

In 1948, Chicago's method of segregating housing—restrictive covenants—was struck down in court, triggering white flight. The South Side suffered, but unlike in other neighborhoods in other cities, the black middle class in Chicago did not follow whites to the suburbs. The result is that while the South Side bears a disproportionate share of the city's poverty, it also has several steady working- to middle-class neighborhoods.

Michelle Obama's South Shore, for example, held on to its basic economic makeup. "When we moved over, [the neighborhood] was changing," Robinson said. "There were good schools, that's why people moved, and it was the reason we moved. I enjoyed living there. It was fine with me that it was changing. Some people felt the schools were too geared to whites. People were very conscious and wanted black artists in the schools. My point was just to go to school and learn what you have to learn."

Robinson and her husband also had the advantage of a few overlooked attributes of Chicago. The South Side was almost a black world unto itself, replete with the economic and cultural complexity of the greater city. There were debutantes and cotillions as well as gangs and drug addicts. Mostly, there were men like Fraser Robinson, black people working a job, trying to get by. The diversity and the demographics allowed the Robinsons to protect their kids from the street life, and also from direct, personal racism. And then there was family life. The Robinsons played board games on the weekends. Michelle loved *The Brady Bunch*.

"We had a very fortunate upbringing," says Obama's brother, Craig Robinson. "It was filled with good times. We were like every other family. We had love and discipline. We had caring parents ... It wasn't unusual at all. It wasn't that everyone had both parents in the house, but it certainly wasn't like it is now, where you find single-parent families everywhere. Folks went to work, people were excited to get good grades ... People would laugh about folks finding out you were getting in trouble. People had mothers at home. So if someone broke a window, you always found out about it. You had a secondary line of defense."

This cocoon that surrounded Michelle Obama in her formative years helps explain some of the statements and actions that fanned controversy during the campaign. Obama's Princeton thesis on "Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community," for example, has been interpreted as a budding Garveyite's call to arms. Exhibit A seems to be her banal citation of Stokely Carmichael to explain black separatism, and her observation that Princeton made her "more aware of [her] 'Blackness' than ever before."

A hostile reading of those words hinges on a misunderstanding of the complexities of segregation. In fact, for the legions of black people who grew up like Michelle Obama—in a functioning, self-contained African American world—racial identity recedes in the consciousness. You know you're black, but in much the same way that white people know they are white. Since everyone else around you looks like you, you

just take it as the norm, the standard, the unremarkable. Objectively, you know you're in the minority, but that status hits home only when you walk out into the wider world and realize that, out there, you really are different.

I came up in segregated West Baltimore. I understood black as a culture—as Etta James, jumping the broom, the Electric Slide. I understood the history and the politics, the debilitating effects of racism. But I did not understand blackness as a minority until I was an "only," until I was a young man walking into rooms filled with people who did not look like me. In many ways, segregation protected me—to this day, I've never been called a nigger by a white person, and although I know that racism is part of why I define myself as black, I don't *feel* that way, any more than I feel that the two oceans define me as American. But in other ways, segregation left me unprepared for the discovery that my world was not *the* world. In her book *Michelle: A Biography*, Liza Mundy quotes another South Sider explaining the predicament:

"When you grow up in a black community with a warm black family, you are aware of the fact that you are black, but you don't feel it ... After a certain point you do just kind of think you're in your own world, and you become very comfortable in that world, and to this day there are African Americans who feel very uncomfortable when they step out of it ... This is a society that never lets you forget that you are black."

In her thesis, Michelle Obama grapples with her dawning sense of race as a divider, and with the idea that the world she knew as a child was very different from the one she was entering as a college student. In that light, her words in Wisconsin deserve another look. It's easy to be proud of America as a young black kid with a mother and a father, a solid community, and no direct exposure to racism. But Obama's statement was about her *adult* life. Post-1960s segregation shielded many of us from feeling different, but it could not save us from the weirdness of having white people touching our hair, from the awkwardness of not knowing whether Led Zeppelin was a man or a group, or, more viscerally, from the pain of witnessing the episodes involving Willie Horton, Sister Souljah, and Rodney King.

Standing behind that podium in Milwaukee, Obama was waxing nostalgic. That doesn't mean she was wrong. She was merely expressing the hope that the world could be as it was in South Shore, filled with people who get up, raise kids, and go to work, and never have to think about being "the other."

In most black people, there is a South Side, a sense of home, that never leaves, and yet to compete in the world, we have to go forth. So we learn to code-switch and become bilingual. We save our Timberlands for the weekend, and our jokes for the cats in the mail room. Some of us give ourselves up completely and become the mask, while others overcompensate and turn every dustup into the Montgomery bus boycott.

But increasingly, as we move into the mainstream, black folks are taking a third road—being ourselves. Implicit in

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isn't her story.**

the notion of code-switching is a belief in the illegitimacy of blacks as Americans, as well as a disbelief in the ability of our white peers to understand us. But if you see black identity as you see southern identity, or Irish identity, or Italian identity—not as a separate trunk, but as a branch of the American tree, with roots in the broader experience—then you understand that the particulars of black culture are inseparable from the particulars of the country.

Pop culture has laid the groundwork for that recognition. Barack Obama's coalition—the young, the black, the urban, the hip—was originally assembled by hip-hop. Jay-Z and Nas may be problematic ambassadors, but their ilk are why those who thought Barack and Michelle were giving each other a “terrorist fist jab” were laughed off the stage. We are as physically segregated as ever, yet the changes in media have drawn black idiom into the broader American narrative.

In 2002, the rapper Ice Cube produced and starred in *Barbershop*. The movie was a surprise hit, spawning a sequel, a spin-off, and a short-lived TV series. Its success shocked industry-watchers, because it took place exclusively in a black community and seemingly focused on “black issues.” But you could find the same characters in any other ethnic community. Think of Michelle Obama's sharp sense of humor and her insistence on viewing her husband as mortal, and how both traits were derided during the campaign as un-first-ladylike and fed the caricature of her as an Angry Black Woman. In reality, her summation of her husband as “a gifted man, but in the end ... just a man” could have come out of the mouth of any sitcom wife on TV.

When I saw Obama in Chicago and took her for white, it was not because of her cadences, mannerisms, or dress, but because of the radical proposition she put forth—a black community fully vested, no DuBoisian veil, in the country at large. A buddy of mine once remarked that Michelle “makes Barack black.” But that understates things. She doesn't simply make Barack black—she makes him American.

“I keep saying this: Michelle, Barack, and my son are not abnormal,” Marian Robinson said. “All my relatives, all my friends, all their friends, all their parents, almost all of them have the same story. It's just that their families aren't running for president. It bothers me that people see [Michelle and Barack] as so phenomenal, because there's so much of that in the black neighborhood. They went to the same schools we all did. They went through the same struggles.”

THE LAST TIME I saw Michelle Obama in person, in a small room at the Westin Tabor Center hotel in Denver, I was convinced that she could be taken for nothing but black. I had spent the past few weeks following her from set piece to set piece—Obama talks to military spouses in Virginia, Obama and her family make care packages for soldiers, Obama addresses the Hispanic caucus at the Democratic National Convention. But nothing I'd seen at those events outweighed the impressions of her character that I was forming from my encounters with the wide streets of the South Side, one of the few places in the country where African Americans could utter the mantra “Black and proud” without a hint of irony.

Her day was almost finished, and she was tired. I was the last in a battery of interviews. Still, she smiled, shook my hand, and said, reaching for a vase of plastic flowers, “We got these for you. What, you don't believe we bought these for you?” I laughed, sat down, and asked her about her childhood.

“My mom and maybe a couple others were some of the few who were able to stay at home,” she explained. “A lot of my friends, they weren't called latchkey kids, they were just kids whose parents worked ... We went to the public school right around the corner and we had lunch, and you could go home for lunch, and we had recess and there weren't closed campuses then ... They'd bring their bag lunch, they'd sit on the kitchen floor and talk to my mom. There was one other mother who we'd do that with.”

There it was, that old neighborhood nostalgia and pride, woven into the larger American quilt. Obama's recollections offer no nods to the disproportionate poverty that has always haunted black Chicago. But that was not her world, and it isn't her story. Since the days of Frederick Douglass—another biracial black man—black leaders have styled themselves as the social conscience of the country. As laudable—if at times opportunistic—as that approach may be, it has also marginalized the very people they were trying to help. The typical black political narrative of using one's humble beginnings to make the country true to itself flies against the dominant image of America as the “good guy.” It's also a narrative that holds more truth for the activist, the professional scold, than for the rank and file. If Barack and Michelle Obama are to truly transcend the racial divide, it won't be through the narrative of justice, but through the mythology of the Great—and common—Cause.

On the night of his victory, Barack Obama talked about Ann Nixon Cooper, a black woman who, at the age of 106, had voted for him. But when Obama told her story, he presented her not just as someone who'd been born a generation after slavery and had seen segregation, but as a woman who'd seen the women's-suffrage movement, the dawn of aviation and the automobile, the Depression and the Dust Bowl, and Pearl Harbor. He presented Nixon Cooper as an African American who was not doubly conscious, just conscious. That is the third road that black America is walking. It's not coincidental that two black people from the South Side are leading us on that road. If you're looking for the heralds of a “post-racial” America, if that adjective is ever to be more than a stupid, unlettered flourish, then look to those, like Michelle Obama, with a sense of security in who they are—those, black or white, who hold blackness as more than the losing end of racism.

These heralds offer a deeper understanding of African American life, a greater appreciation of the bourgeois ordinariness of our experience. “People have never met a Michelle Obama,” the soon-to-be first lady said toward the end of our interview. “But what they'll come to learn is that there are thousands and thousands of Michelle and Barack Obamas across America. You just don't live next door to them, or there isn't a TV show about them.”

There is now. ■

Ta-Nehisi Coates is an Atlantic contributing editor.

RACE DOESN'T MATTER, *Barack Obama's top advisers argued during the presidential election. At least, that's what they said in public. Behind closed doors, however, Obama's campaign worked methodically to woo white voters without alienating black ones—and vice versa.*

STATE of the UNION

RACE OVER?

By Marc Ambinder

A FEW DAYS AFTER the presidential election, as Barack Obama's senior staff went into post-campaign hibernation, I logged onto my AOL Instant Messenger account at about 7:30 a.m. to find that David Axelrod, Obama's chief strategist, was one of the few live names on my buddy list.

Over the telephone, Axelrod can be opaque and cautious; online, he's a little more direct. So I asked him about something I had noticed while reviewing the election results. Why had the Democratic presidential candidate underperformed relative to white Democratic statewide candidates in states such as North Carolina, Georgia, and Missouri? Why had a crescent of counties throughout the South and up through Appalachia blushed quite red?

"Do you think," I typed to Axelrod, "when all is said and done, that racism was responsible for some of the states being as close as they were?"

Axelrod was unruffled.

"Marc, we won NC, VA, FLA, OHIO, IN and ran away with PA!"

"OK, fair enough," I typed back.

Axelrod continued: "If there were one state where we underperformed Gore and Kerry, it would be a fair question." Obama's victory, in other words, had made the question irrelevant.

During the campaign, Axelrod and Obama's campaign manager, David Plouffe, as well as other members of the senior staff, had routinely fended off questions about race. It didn't matter, they insisted. "At the end of the day, I mean honestly, we just never were that concerned," Plouffe told me shortly before the election.

But some of them *were* concerned.

One was Cornell Belcher, a top Obama pollster who had conducted some of the campaign's earliest research on race. In the fall, when some Obama advisers began predicting a landslide, Belcher would have none of it. "No one with any real post-civil-rights understanding of our national political contours could with a straight face predicate a Democratic national landslide," he told me in September. Over the summer, two Pennsylvania congressmen, Tim Holden and Jack Murtha, had sparked anxiety in the Obama campaign when they reported that racial resistance to the Democrat's candidacy was hardening in their state. Earlier, the AFL-CIO, which spent \$53.4 million to elect Obama, had noticed that older white men in Ohio and Pennsylvania were unreceptive to the campaign's economic messages. The AFL-CIO's secretary-treasurer, Richard Trumka, responded by giving an extraordinary but little-noticed speech in Las Vegas, in which he told steelworkers, "There's only one really, really bad reason to vote against Barack Obama, and that's because he's not white."

Trumka spoke about an encounter he'd had during the Democratic primaries. "I went back to my hometown in Nemacolin [Pennsylvania], and I ran into a woman that I've ... known for years. She was active in Democratic politics when I was still in grade school." The woman told Trumka that she was voting for Hillary Clinton. "'There's no way that I'd ever vote for Obama.' I said, 'Why is that?' She said, 'Well, he's Muslim.' And I said, 'Well, actually, he's Christian, just like you and I. But so what if he's Muslim?' Then she shook her head and said, 'Well, he won't wear that American-flag pin on his lapel.'" Trumka told her that Obama did, indeed, wear a flag pin. Then she said, "'Well, I just don't trust him.' ... She drops her voice a bit. And she says, 'Because he's black.' And



I says: 'Look around this town. Nemaocolin's a dying town. There's no jobs here. Our kids are moving away because there's no future here. And here is a man, Barack Obama, who's gonna fight for people like us, and you wanna tell me that you won't vote for him because of the color of his skin? Are you out of your ever-loving mind?'"

The Obama campaign faced a fundamental challenge: it had to make those pilsners of the Democratic electorate—true independents, Reagan Democrats, and working-class whites—culturally comfortable with Obama while simultaneously increasing African American participation. To do this, Obama would have to decouple a century's worth of political antagonisms. Because whenever the political engagement and intensity of African American voters have grown, so has racial polarity among voters.

Even during the 2008 primaries, a discomfiting pattern had emerged: Barack Obama did his best overall in the states with the largest or the smallest percentages of African American voters—think of South Carolina, where blacks made up 55 percent of the Democratic-primary vote, and Vermont, where they made up less than 2 percent. Obama won in states where black Democrats had already attained a measure of political power, or where whites had never competed with blacks. In states where black voters made up more than 20 percent of the general-election vote, the political scientist Charles Franklin found an inverse relationship between the proportion of black voters and the share of Obama's vote among whites. The greater the proportion of blacks in a state's population, the smaller Obama's share of the white vote.

Obama refused to accept this late-20th-century model of racial politics, and he had no intention of fighting the

general election with the same bolo punches and taunts that had stopped working decades ago. He had written a memoir about the labyrinthine complexities of racial difference. He wasn't afraid to acknowledge the psychological effects of, say, race-based affirmative action on poorer whites. He had an exotic name. He was new. He was young. Most of his advisers weren't black.

"There was a period when it was not at all clear that Obama would be able to win the vast majority of the African American vote," David Binder, Obama's focus-group guru, told me after the election. "The biggest problem we had with African Americans would be that they didn't think he could ever win." In the focus groups, black voters told Binder that they didn't believe whites would ever vote for Obama. "That all changed with Iowa," he said. "The Iowa results proved to many African Americans that Obama had broader-based appeal and was not just someone who was going to be a token African American candidate."

Last February, the black journalist Tavis Smiley held his annual State of the Black Union forum in New Orleans. For the second year in a row, Obama declined to attend. (The 2007 forum took place on the day he launched his campaign.) Smiley was angry about the slight and criticized Obama openly. The backlash against Smiley was intense. This was just after Obama had won the South Carolina primary, after African Americans had united around Obama in part because the Clinton campaign seemed to be writing him—and them—off. Smiley quit *The Tom Joyner Morning Show*, one of the country's most popular radio programs among African Americans, because, as Joyner explained to his audience, "He can't take the hate he's taken over Barack Obama. He's always busting Barack Obama's chops."

The Smiley backlash was evidence to Obama's inner circle that, in the words of one adviser, "Barack became untouchable in the community," in much the same way that civil-rights heroes such as John Lewis had earned a lifetime's worth of goodwill and benefit of the doubt. "Tavis Smiley was the object lesson for everyone," says Anita Dunn, a senior campaign strategist.

"We came to realize that the black community, politically, had moved into a different era," another senior Obama adviser told me shortly after the election. "You could get intensity in the African American community by giving them a candidate they could see as being able to win. You didn't have to speak to them in a way that would make white people nervous." Obama shared the antipathy of liberal whites and younger blacks toward the hand-to-hand, transactional politics that had characterized the relationship between the Democratic Party and many African American leaders.

It took the campaign a while to figure out the right course. "We did not have an organized strategy around this," says Michael Strautmanis, a counselor to Obama. "It was like a series of constant recalibrations."

In the winter of 2007, the campaign entered a bidding war with the Clinton campaign over the endorsement of State Senator Darrell Jackson, the pastor of one of the largest congregations in South Carolina. The Obama campaign offered him a \$5,000-per-month retainer, and Jackson said he would soon endorse him. But then he sent word that the Clinton campaign was offering a more lucrative contract, implying, at least to the Obama team, that he would endorse Obama only if they would tender a more generous offer. Through his deputy campaign manager, Obama refused. It would be the last time that Obama negotiated with black pastors this way. (Jackson endorsed Clinton.)

A few weeks before the general election, aides to Anthony Evans, the pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas and an influential radio talk-show host, contacted the Obama campaign and laid out a political battle plan. Evans would mobilize 300,000 volunteers and dispatch 72 church vans to battleground states on Election Day. He would touch more than 2 million voters. All he needed was \$5 million to pay for it. The Obama campaign thanked him and said no. Evans threatened to go public with the refusal. The Obama campaign pointed to examples of other black leaders who had confronted Obama in public, and invited Evans, in essence, to bring it on. (Evans apologized the day after the election.)

The recalibrations extended into decisions about what speeches Obama should give. Shortly before winning the South Carolina primary, Obama spoke at a celebration honoring Martin Luther King Jr. at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, in Atlanta. It was a propitious moment for African Americans: Obama had become a credible front-runner for the nomination after winning Iowa. Some advisers wanted him to speak directly to African Americans as he headed into a primary in the first state in the nation to secede, but Obama chose to deliver a much broader message: he ended the speech with a story about a developing friendship between a white female volunteer and a black male volunteer in South Carolina, pointing the way toward a different kind of racial politics.

Cornell Belcher's polling and decades of political-science research showed that white voters held certain stereotypes about black politicians—namely, that they were more likely to raise taxes and redistribute wealth, were weak on crime, and favored heavy government spending to help the poor (read: minorities like them). To Belcher, such stereotypes were a legacy of Lee Atwater and the Republican Party's infamous "Southern strategy," which converted overt racial bias into coded language about the economy. At the height of the Reagan Revolution, Atwater told an interviewer: "You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things, and a by-product of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites." By the time Ronald Reagan was elected, Atwater explained, polite society no longer tolerated overt racism, so Republican consultants resorted to formulations that hit racial trigger points but afforded plausible deniability. Belcher thought those triggers still had the potential to work with white working-class voters.

To confound the stereotypes, Obama's campaign decided to challenge them directly. It flooded white working-class regions in North Carolina, Virginia, Iowa, Nevada, and Colorado with ads claiming that Obama would cut taxes for 95 percent of Americans, and others alleging that McCain would raise taxes on health care "for millions." Both ads, while arguably misleading, were also successful. By the end of the campaign, more Americans believed that John McCain would raise their taxes than thought Obama would. To be fair, other Obama aides dispute the notion that the emphasis on taxes came out of a strategic discussion on race. Plouffe told me that the tax argument had always been planned for a fall rollout, and was intended to speak directly to economic anxiety—which it did.

When, at the end of the campaign, John McCain daubed Obama with the tag of "redistributionist," Obama aides were relieved to find that the label did not change voters' perception of Obama. "It didn't work at all," Plouffe told me.

For the record, McCain aides said that their strategy had nothing to do with Obama's race, but just was what it was: Obama would confiscate money from the rich and give it to others. McCain saw him as a quasi-socialist who intended to redistribute income. Mark Salter, McCain's closest aide, told me it was "bullshit" to think that McCain had an ulterior motive, citing McCain's refusal to allow his surrogates to bring up Obama's former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, as an example of the Republican candidate's sensitivity to racial issues.

According to research that Belcher's firm conducted about three weeks before the election, swing voters had an unusually high degree of what he called "racial aversion." Belcher had asked registered white voters whether they strongly agreed, agreed, did not know, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with a series of statements designed to measure attitudes toward black people. (One of those statements: "I often feel that African Americans aren't as proud and patriotic about this country as I am." Another: "As the result of racial preferences, less qualified minorities too often get hired and promoted.") The more the survey respondents agreed with these statements, the more racial animus they presumably held.

"The fluid voters that were left floating out there were voters who had above-average scores on racial aversion, but they weren't behaving strongly like the rest of the voters who held above-average racial aversions," Belcher told me. In other words, there was a cohort of voters leaning toward Obama whose racial-aversion scores were comparable to those of voters who were explicit about their prejudice and said they would not vote for Obama.

These voters were susceptible to a form of cross-pressure, which Belcher identified as a dissonance between their gut beliefs and their material circumstances. "Three, four weeks out, part of what was driving that swing electorate to be swing was this cross-pressure," he said. "If you look at their issues, they should be for Barack Obama; if you look at their racial-aversion scores, they should be for John McCain."

Two weeks before the election, I visited the Obama campaign headquarters in downtown Chicago and spent the day with various advisers. Exactly four years earlier, John Kerry was flying from urban center to urban center, enlisting the support of Bill Clinton to pump up minority turnout. In some states, internal Kerry polling in mid-October showed Bush overperforming among black voters. Democrats were obsessed with what they called the "African American piece": the quadrennial party efforts to get out the black vote, usually with visits from black leaders and robocalls from Bill Clinton.

But on October 22, 2008, Obama was in largely white exurban Virginia. That morning, Anita Dunn predicted that Obama would win between 95 and 98 percent of the African American vote. "We've done some polls recently in which not one African American voter was voting for John McCain." (Exit polls show that Obama won 95 percent of the black vote nationally and between 94 and 98 percent in most battleground states.)

As foregone as this lopsided outcome may seem, it also highlights what Obama did not have to do: he did not have to pander to black leaders; he did not have to target specific messages at the black community with the attendant risk of exacerbating economic tension between blacks and whites. He did not have to bring up race. And that was key, because Belcher's polling confirmed that culturally anxious whites were willing to vote for a black candidate so long as they did not meditate on the candidate's blackness. Obama was able to credential himself as an African American without engaging in overt racial politics. Or, rather, the black community credentialed Obama without his resorting to racial politicking, something that white Democratic candidates had to do.

What Obama did is also instructive: he bypassed the traditional filters that mediate the relationship between a politician and African American voters. Tom Joyner's radio show reaches millions of African Americans each week; Obama, according to his campaign, appeared on it more than 15 times. Since white editors and reporters don't listen to Joyner's show, no one seems to have noticed. Most notably, Obama's campaign found out where black voters live, registered

them, and persuaded them to vote early. In Georgia, African Americans accounted for 36 percent of the early vote.

"The vast majority of the mail and radio and TV that was targeted at African Americans was informational," says Pete Giangreco, a media strategist for the campaign. "How do you register? How do you go and vote early?"

At 7 p.m. on Election Day, an Obama field staffer told me, there was momentary panic in the Ohio campaign headquarters: there were no lines at polling places. This was weird; in 2004, memorably, huge lines of black voters and young voters were waiting to cast their ballots when the polls closed. Early voting had erased that picture.

In the end, Obama replicated the image-control paradigm of successful black Americans who have transcended racial boundaries: Oprah, Tiger Woods, Colin Powell, Michael

Jordan. The writer Michael Grunwald calls these men and women "no-demands" blacks; their acceptance by whites was not predicated on whites' having to give up anything fundamental or betray their convictions or untangle a major stereotype. Belcher told me before the election, "I don't think a black man can be president of the United States of America. However, I think an exceptional individual who also happens to be black can be president of the United States of America."

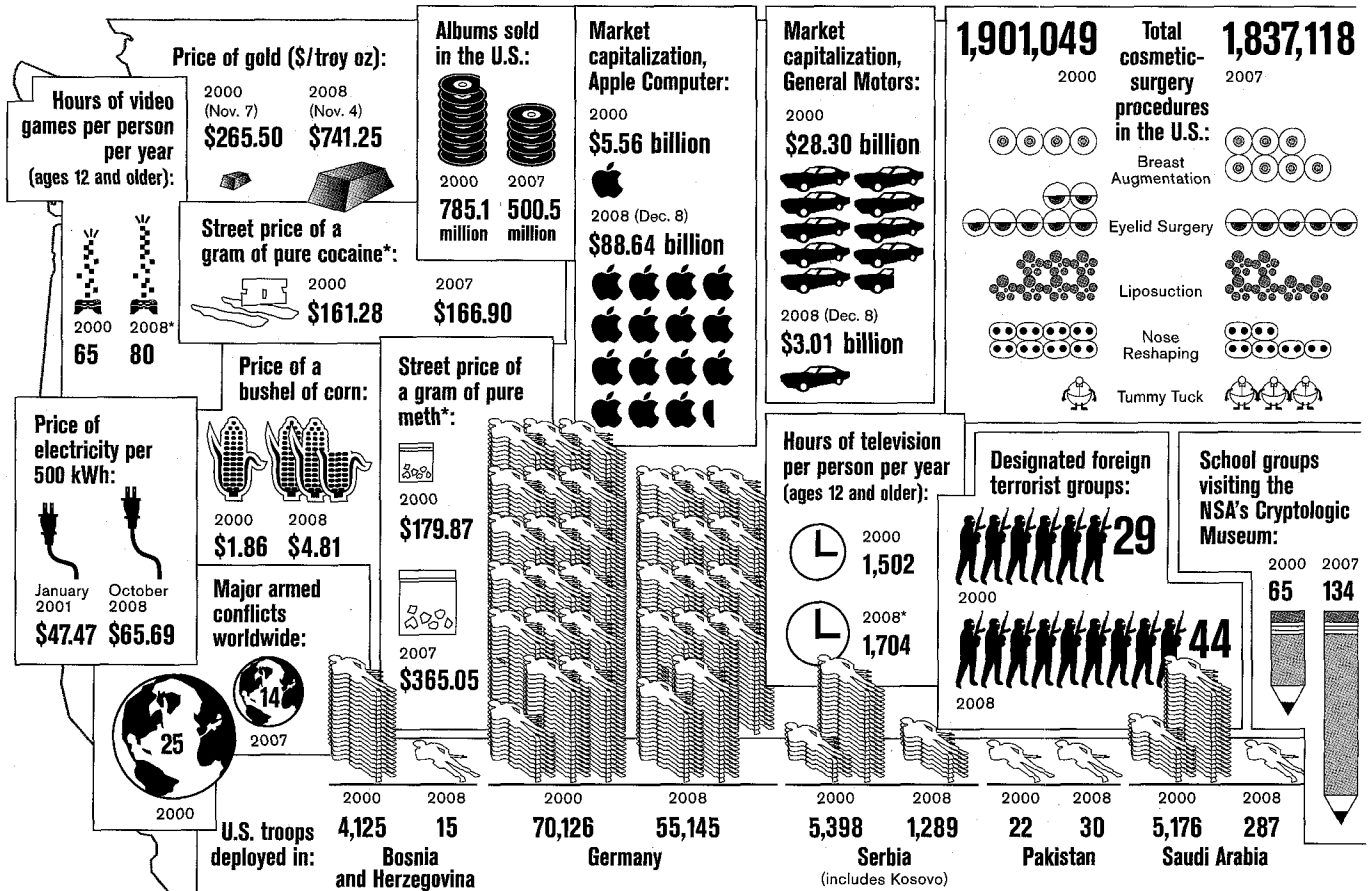
The election was a toss-up among those who had voted before, but Obama won overwhelmingly among the 11 percent of voters—roughly 13 million people—who were voting for the first time. Sixty-two percent of them were under 30, and their racial-aversion

scores put them in the liberal camp, ideologically. "The newer, younger voters struggle less with the racial and cultural ghosts of our country's past," Belcher said. "They turned the page and stopped this race from being a toss-up."

So Obama did find a way to break the racial code. But what timing! Massive economic cross-pressures; the country's slow evolution into a minority-majority polity; the iron grip that Democrats have on younger voters; the aging of the white working class—Obama came along just as demographics were beginning to undo that code anyway.

Maybe. After the election, Belcher resampled the white voters whose racial animus he had measured before. More than half had voted for McCain, but not by an overwhelming margin. Belcher concluded that Obama might have done better among them had he not been black. In 1992, Belcher noted, 85 percent of voters who said the economy was bad broke for Bill Clinton. In 2008, in a verifiably worse economic climate, only 66 percent of voters who said the economy was bad voted for Barack Obama. "The economy is clearly not the only story. I could argue that the economy wasn't as big an impact this time around as in 1992," Belcher told me. "You can't look at that swath of hard-red counties that actually grew even redder and say that we are post-racial." ■

Marc Ambinder is an Atlantic associate editor. He blogs at marcambinder.theatlantic.com.



STATE of the UNION

Then and Now

THE NATION BARACK OBAMA INHERITS

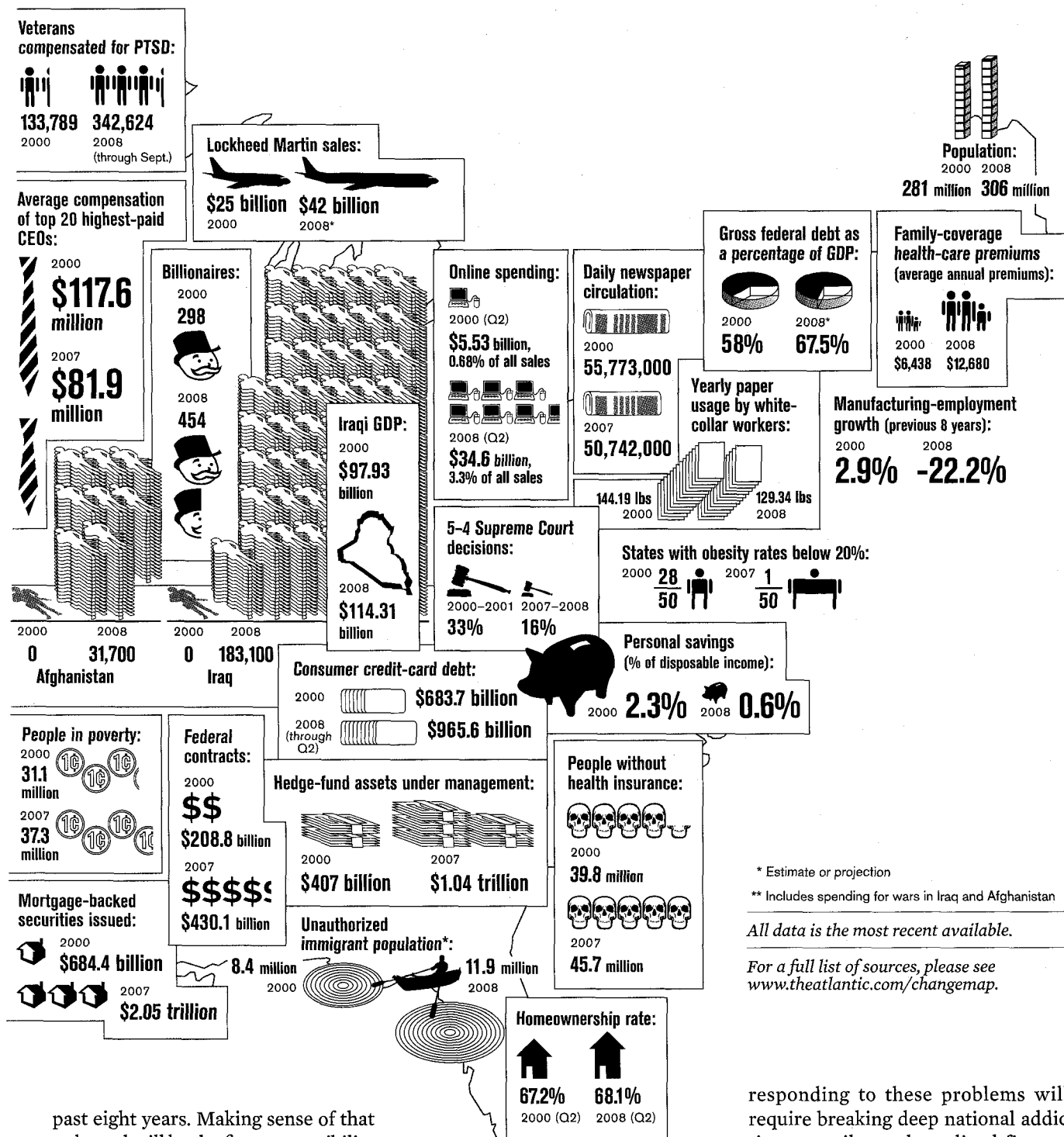
By Timothy Lavin

Graphics by Omnivore

ON MARCH 4, 1933, Franklin Roosevelt addressed a crowd of 400,000 at his first inauguration. The past few years had seen a spectacular decline in the nation's fortunes, born of what he called the "mad chase of evanescent profits." Banks were failing, savings disappearing, real estate and commodities collapsing.

Fascism was rising abroad. In response, Roosevelt pledged "a disciplined attack upon our common problems." He didn't get much more specific than that. And, really, he didn't have to. The people wanted *change*, in the current vernacular—or, more precisely, they wanted a government that could respond coherently to the profound changes that were already under way.

Barack Obama assumes the presidency this year amid a similar sense of national crisis, and having made similar promises of change. And, like Roosevelt, he'll be leading a country very different from the one his predecessor inherited: as the statistics on this map show, change itself is one thing we've seen in abundance in the



* Estimate or projection

** Includes spending for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

All data is the most recent available.

For a full list of sources, please see www.theatlantic.com/changemap.

past eight years. Making sense of that upheaval will be the first responsibility of the new administration.

Since 2000, America has changed in small ways, in big ways, and in ways that seem innocent enough now but no doubt herald some radical disruptions to come. Many more people are poor, uninsured, and in prison. Many more are billionaires. The burden of health-care costs has grown heavier, and so

have we. We charge more, save less, and play a lot more video games. Even the things that haven't changed much—like the amount of oil we consume, or the price of cocaine, or the size of our military—reflect not so much stasis as unsustainable trajectories. For Obama,

responding to these problems will require breaking deep national addictions—to oil, to etheralized finance, to profligacy of all kinds—and, somehow, easing the tremens along the way. Perhaps, in doing so, he should heed a warning Roosevelt issued on the campaign trail: "Without leadership alert and sensitive to change," he said, "we are bogged up or lose our way." ■

Timothy Lavin is an Atlantic associate editor.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE for the past eight years of dismal American governance? "George W. Bush" is a decent answer. But we should reserve some blame for the Founding Fathers, who created a presidential office that is ill-considered, vaguely defined, and ripe for abuse. Here's how to fix what the Founders got wrong—before the next G. W. Bush enters the Oval Office.

STATE of the UNION

THE FOUNDERS' GREAT MISTAKE

By Garrett Epps

FOR THE PAST eight years, George W. Bush has treated the White House much as Kenneth Grahame's Mr. Toad treated a new automobile—like a shiny toy to be wrecked by racing the motor, spinning smoke from the tires, and smashing through farmyards until the wheels come off. Bush got to the Oval Office despite having lost the popular vote, and he governed with a fine disdain for democratic and legal norms—stonewalling congressional oversight; detaining foreigners and U.S. citizens on his "inherent authority"; using the Justice Department as a political cudgel; ordering officials to ignore statutes and treaties that he found inconvenient; and persisting in actions, such as the Iraq War, that had come to be deeply unpopular in Congress and on Main Street.

Understandably, most Americans today are primarily concerned with whether Barack Obama can clean up Bush's mess. But as Bush leaves the White House, it's worth asking why he was able to behave so badly for so long without being stopped by the Constitution's famous "checks and balances." Some of the problems with the Bush administration, in fact, have their source not in Bush's leadership style but in the constitutional design of the presidency. Unless these problems are fixed, it

will only be a matter of time before another hot-rodder gets hold of the keys and damages the country further.

The historian Jack N. Rakove has written, "The creation of the presidency was [the Framers'] most creative act." That may be true, but it wasn't their best work. The Framers were designing something the modern world had never seen—a republican chief executive who would owe his power to the people rather than to heredity or brute force. The wonder is not that they got so much wrong, but that they got anything right at all.

According to James Madison's *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*, the executive received surprisingly little attention at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Debate over the creation and workings of the new Congress was long and lively; the presidency, by contrast, was fashioned relatively quickly, after considerably less discussion. One important reason for the delegates' reticence was that George Washington, the most admired man in the world at that time, was the convention's president. Every delegate knew that Washington would, if he chose, be the first president of the new federal government—and that the new government itself would likely fail without Washington at the helm. To express too much fear of executive authority

STEVE BRODNER



might have seemed disrespectful to the man for whom the office was being tailored.

Washington's force of personality terrified almost all of his contemporaries, and although he said little as presiding officer, he was not always quiet. Once, when an unknown delegate left a copy of some proposed provisions lying around, Washington scolded the delegates like a headmaster reproving careless prep-schoolers, and then left the document on a table, saying, "Let him who owns it take it." No one did.

Even when Washington remained silent, his presence shaped the debate. When, on June 1, James Wilson suggested that the executive power be lodged in a single person, no one spoke up in response. The silence went on until Benjamin Franklin finally suggested a debate; the debate itself proceeded awkwardly for a little while, and was then put off for another day.

Many of the conversations about presidential authority were similarly awkward, and tended to be indirect. Later interpreters have found the original debates on the presidency, in the words of former Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, "almost as enigmatic as the dreams Joseph was called upon to interpret for Pharaoh."

In the end, the Framers were artfully vague about the extent and limits of the president's powers. Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, which empowers Congress, runs 429 words; Article II, Section 2, the presidential equivalent, is about half as long. The powers assigned to the president alone are few: he can require Cabinet members to give him their opinions in writing; he can convene a special session of Congress "on extraordinary occasions," and may set a date for adjournment if the two houses cannot agree on one; he receives ambassadors and is commander in chief of the armed forces; he has a veto on legislation (which Congress can override); and he has the power to pardon.

The president also *shares* two powers with the Senate—to make treaties, and to appoint federal judges and other "officers of the United States," including Cabinet members. And, finally, the president has two specific *duties*—to give regular reports on the state of the union, and to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed."

All in all, the text of Article II, while somewhat ambiguous—a flaw that would be quickly exploited—provided little warning that the office of president would become uniquely powerful. Even at the convention, Madison mused that it "would rarely if ever happen that the executive constituted as ours is proposed to be would have firmness enough to resist the legislature." In fact, when citizens considered the draft Constitution during the ratification debates in 1787 and 1788, many of their concerns centered on the possibility that the Senate would make the president its cat's-paw. Few people foresaw the modern presidency, largely because the office as we know it today bears so little relation to that prescribed by the Constitution.

The modern presidency is primarily the intellectual handiwork not of "the Framers" but of one Framers—Alexander

Hamilton. Hamilton's idea of the presidency can be found in a remarkable speech he gave to the convention, on June 18, 1787. In it, Hamilton argued that the president should serve for life, name Cabinet members without Senate approval, have an absolute veto on legislation, and have "the direction of war" once "authorized or begun." The president would be a monarch, Hamilton admitted, but an "elective monarch."

Hamilton's plan was so far from the mainstream of thought at the convention that none of its provisions was ever seriously discussed. Nonetheless, Hamilton was and remains the chief theorist of the presidency, first in writing his essays for *The Federalist* and then in serving as George Washington's secretary of the Treasury. In this latter role, acting as Washington's de facto prime minister, Hamilton took full advantage of the vagueness and brevity of Article II, laying the groundwork for an outsize presidency while the war-hero Washington was still in office.

In *The Federalist*, Hamilton had famously proclaimed that "energy in the executive is a leading character in the definition of good government." Just how much energy he favored became clear during America's first foreign crisis, the Neutrality Proclamation controversy of 1793. When Britain and France went to war, many Americans wanted to aid their Revolutionary ally. But Washington and the Federalists were rightly terrified of war with the powerful British Empire.

Washington unilaterally proclaimed that the United States would be neutral.

France's American supporters, covertly aided by Thomas Jefferson, fiercely attacked Washington for exceeding his constitutional authority. The power to make treaties, they said, was jointly lodged in the president and the Senate; how could Washington unilaterally interpret or change the terms of the treaty of alliance with France?

Under the pen name "Pacificus," Hamilton wrote a defense of Washington's power to act without congressional sanction. The first Pacificus essay is the mother document of the "unitary executive" theory that Bush's apologists have pushed to its limits since 2001. Hamilton seized on the first words of Article II: "The executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America." He contrasted this wording with Article I, which governs Congress and which begins, "All legislative powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States." What this meant, Hamilton argued, was that Article II was "a general grant of ... power" to the president. Although Congress was limited to its enumerated powers, the executive could do literally anything that the Constitution did not expressly forbid. Hamilton's president existed, in effect, outside the Constitution.

That's the Bush conception, too. In 2005, John Yoo, the author of most of the administration's controversial "torture memos," drew on Hamilton's essay when he wrote, "The Constitution provides a general grant of executive power to the president." Since Article I vests in Congress "only those legislative powers 'herein granted,'" Yoo argued, the more

To express too much fear of executive authority might have seemed disrespectful to Washington, the man for whom the office was being tailored.

broadly stated Article II must grant the president “an unenumerated executive authority”

Hamilton’s interpretation has proved durable even though there is little in the record of constitutional framing and ratification to suggest that anyone else shared his view. In times of crisis, power flows to the executive; too rarely does it flow back. And while Washington himself used his power wisely (Jeffersonians found out in 1812 that pulling the British lion’s tail was poor policy), it was during his administration that the seeds of the “national-security state” were planted.

THE SYSTEM THAT the Framers developed for electing the president was, unfortunately, as flawed as their design of the office itself. When Madison opened discussion on presidential election in Philadelphia, he opined that “the people at large” were the “fittest” electorate. But he immediately conceded that popular election would hurt the South, which had many slaves and few voters relative to the North. To get around this “difficulty,” he proposed using state electors. Electoral-vote strength was based on a state’s total population, not on its number of voters—and the South received representation for three-fifths of its slaves both in the House of Representatives and in the Electoral College.

Scholars still debate whether the Framers foresaw the prospect of a contested presidential election, followed by a peaceful shift of power. (Remember that, as Shakespeare pointed out in *Richard II*, kings left office feet first.) Some members of the founding generation believed that a duly elected president would simply be reelected until his death, at which point the vice president would take his place, much like the Prince of Wales ascending to the throne.

Perhaps as a result, the mechanics of presidential election laid out in the Constitution quickly showed themselves to be utterly unworkable. The text of Article II contained no provision for a presidential ticket—with one candidate for president and one for vice president. Instead, each elector was supposed to vote for any two presidential candidates; the candidate who received the largest majority of votes would be president; the runner-up would be vice president. In 1800, this ungainly system nearly brought the country to civil war. Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr ran as a team; their electors were expected to vote for both of them. Jefferson assumed that one or two would drop Burr’s name from the ballot. That would have given Jefferson the larger majority, with Burr winning the vice presidency. But due to a still-mysterious misunderstanding, all the electors voted for both candidates, producing a tie in the electoral vote and throwing the election to a House vote.

The ensuing drama lasted six days and 36 ballots before Hamilton threw Federalist support to Jefferson (as much as he despised Jefferson, he regarded Burr as “an embryo-Caesar”). This choice began the chain of events that led to Hamilton’s death at Burr’s hands three years later. More important, the imbroglio exposed the fragility of the election procedure.

In 1804, the Electoral College was “repaired” by the Twelfth Amendment; now the electors would vote for one candidate for president and another for vice president. This

was the first patch on Article II, but far from the last—the procedures for presidential election and succession were changed by constitutional amendment in 1933, 1951, 1961, and 1967. None of this fine-tuning has been able to fix the system. In 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000, the Electoral College produced winners who received fewer popular votes than the losers, and it came startlingly close to doing so again in 2004; in 1824, 1876, and 2000, it also produced prolonged uncertainty and the prospect of civil unrest—or the fact of it.

Even when the election system works passably, a president-elect must endure another indefensible feature of the succession process. In England, a new prime minister takes office the day after parliamentary elections; in France, a newly elected president is inaugurated within a week or two. But when Americans choose a new leader, the victor waits 11 weeks—nearly a quarter-year—to assume office. The presidential interregnum is a recurrent period of danger.

Originally, a new president didn’t take office until March 4. This long delay nearly destroyed the nation after the 1860 election. During the disastrous “secession winter,” Abraham Lincoln waited in Illinois while his feckless predecessor, James Buchanan, permitted secessionists to seize federal arsenals and forts. By March 1861, when Lincoln took office, the Civil War was nearly lost, though officially it had not even begun.

In 1932, Franklin Roosevelt crushed the incumbent, Herbert Hoover, but had to wait four months to take office. During that period, Hoover attempted to force the president-elect to abandon his proposals for economic reform. Roosevelt refused to commit himself, but the resulting uncertainty led the financial system to the brink of collapse.

The Twentieth Amendment, ratified in 1933, cut the interregnum nearly in half, but 11 weeks is still too long. After his defeat in 1992, President George H. W. Bush committed U.S. troops to a military mission in Somalia. The mission turned toxic, and Bill Clinton withdrew the troops the following year. Clinton was criticized for his military leadership, perhaps rightly—but the Constitution should not have permitted a repudiated president to commit his successor to an international conflict that neither the new president nor Congress had approved.

As the elder Bush did, an interregnum president retains the power of life or death over the nation. As Clinton did, an interregnum president may issue controversial or corrupt pardons. In either case, the voters have no means of holding their leader accountable.

THE MOST DANGEROUS presidential malfunction might be called the “runaway presidency.” The Framers were fearful of making the president too dependent on Congress; short of impeachment—the atomic bomb of domestic politics—there are no means by which a president can be reined in politically during his term. Taking advantage of this deficiency, runaway presidents have at times committed the country to courses of action that the voters never approved—or ones they even rejected.

John Tyler, who was never elected president, was the first runaway, in 1841. William Henry Harrison had served only

a few weeks; after his death, the obscure Tyler governed in open defiance of the Whig Party that had put him on the ticket, pressing unpopular proslavery policies that helped set the stage for the Civil War.

Andrew Johnson was the next unelected runaway. Politically, he had been an afterthought. But after Lincoln's assassination, Johnson adopted a pro-Southern Reconstruction policy. He treated the party that had nominated him with such scorn that many contemporaries came to believe he was preparing to use the Army to break up Congress by force. After Johnson rebuffed any attempt at compromise, the Republican House impeached him, but the Senate, by one vote, refused to remove him from office. His obduracy crippled Reconstruction; in fact, we still haven't fully recovered from that crisis.

American political commentators tend to think loosely about exertions of presidential authority. The paradigm cases are Lincoln rallying the nation after Fort Sumter, and Roosevelt,

about a year before Pearl Harbor, using pure executive power to transfer American destroyers to embattled Britain in exchange for use of certain British bases. Because these great leaders used their authority broadly, the thinking goes, assertions of executive prerogative are valid and desirable.

Certainly there are times when presidential firmness is better than rapid changes in policy to suit public opinion. Executive theorists in the United States often pose the choice that way—steady, independent executive leadership or feckless, inconstant pursuit of what Hamilton called “the temporary delusion” of public opinion. But not all shifts in public opinion are delusive or temporary. An executive should have some independence, but a presidency that treats the people as irrelevant is not democratic. It is authoritarian.

Lincoln and Roosevelt asserted emergency powers while holding popular mandates. Lincoln had just won an election that also provided him with a handy majority in Congress; Roosevelt was enormously popular, and in 1940 his party outnumbered the opposition 3-to-1 in the Senate and by nearly 100 seats in the House.

But sometimes a president with little or no political mandate uses the office to further a surprising, obscure, or discredited political agenda. Under these circumstances, what poses as bold leadership is in fact usurpation. The most egregious case arises when a president's policy and leadership have been repudiated by the voters, either by a defeat for reelection or by a sweeping rejection of his congressional allies in a midterm election. When that happens, presidents too often do what George Bush did in 2006—simply persist in the conduct that has alienated the country. Intoxicated by the image of the hero-president, unencumbered by any direct political check, stubborn presidents in this situation have no incentive to change course.

When the voters turn sharply against a president midterm, his leadership loses some or all of its legitimacy, and the result can be disastrous. Clinton was decisively repudiated in November 1994. After the election, the administration and the new Republican Congress remained so far apart on funding decisions that the government had to shut down for 26 days in 1995 and 1996. This episode is now remembered for Clinton's political mastery, but it was actually a dangerous structural failure. (Imagine that the al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, had happened instead on December 20, 1995, when the stalemate had forced the executive branch to send most of its “nonessential” employees home.)

TO SUM UP, while George W. Bush may have been a particularly bad driver, the presidency itself is, and always has been, an unreliable vehicle—with a cranky starter, an engine too big for the chassis, erratic steering, and virtually no brakes. It needs an overhaul, a comprehensive redo of Article II.

Constitutional change is a daunting prospect. But consider how often we have already changed the presidency; it is the Constitution's most-amended feature. And this is the moment to think of reform—the public's attention is focused on the Bush disaster, and ordinary people might be willing to look at the flaws in the office that allowed Bush to do what he did.

So how should the presidency be changed?

IN A HAYSTACK

A needle must feel
deeply needled, ill-
suited to its skin,
to leave its arrow-
straight ways,
to stray
into a haystack,
to mean to lose
or find itself
in that soft
tangle, to fill
its one good eye
with the gold
filament of pasture,
to imagine
itself pillow
to the weary,
supper to bell-
necklaced goats.
A needle like that?
It would be
criminal even
to report
it missing.

—Andrea Cohen

Andrea Cohen's forthcoming collection of poems is Long Division. She is the director of the Blacksmith House Poetry Series in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

First, voters should elect presidents directly. And once the vote is counted, the president-elect (and the new Congress) should take office within a week. Americans accustomed to the current system will object that this would not allow enough time to assemble a Cabinet—but in England and France, the new chief executive considers ministerial nominations before the election. A shorter interregnum would force the creation of something like the British shadow cabinet, in which a candidate makes public the names of his key advisers. That would give voters important information, and provide the president with a running start.

Next, Article II should include a specific and limited set of presidential powers. The “unitary executive” theorists should no longer be allowed to spin a quasi-dictatorship out of the bare phrase *executive power*; like the responsibilities of Congress, those of the president should be clearly enumerated.

It should be made clear, for example, that the president’s powers as commander in chief do not crowd out the power of Congress to start—and stop—armed conflict. Likewise, the duty to “take care that the laws be faithfully executed” needs to be clarified: it is not the power to decide which laws the president wants to follow, or to rewrite new statutes in “signing statements” after Congress has passed them; it is a duty to uphold the Constitution, valid treaties, and congressional statutes (which together, according to the Constitution, form “the supreme law of the land”).

After a transformative midterm election like that of 1994 or 2006, the nation should require a compromise between the rejected president and the new Congress. A president whose party has lost some minimum number of seats in Congress should be forced to form the equivalent of a national-unity government. This could be done by requiring the president to present a new Cabinet that includes members of both parties, which the new Congress would approve or disapprove as a whole—no drawn-out confirmation hearings on each nominee. If the president were unwilling to assemble such a government or unable to get congressional approval after, say, three tries, he would have to resign.

This would not give Congress control of the executive branch. A resigning president would be replaced by the vice president, who would not be subject to the new-Cabinet requirement. This new president might succeed politically where the previous one had failed (imagine Al Gore becoming president in 1995, and running in 1996—and perhaps in 2000—as an incumbent). And that possibility would discourage the new congressional majority from simply rejecting the compromise Cabinet. Resignation might be worse for them than approval.

As a final reform, we should reconsider the entire Hamiltonian concept of the “unitary executive.” When George Washington became president, he left a large organization (the Mount Vernon plantation) to head a smaller one (the federal government). But today, the executive branch is a

behemoth, with control over law enforcement, the military, economic policy, education, the environment, and most other aspects of national life. That behemoth is responsible to one person, and that one person, as we have seen, is only loosely accountable to the electorate.

In other areas, the Framers solved this problem neatly: they divided power in order to protect against its abuse. Congress was split into the House and the Senate to ensure that the legislative process would not be so efficient as to absorb powers properly belonging to the other branches. The problem now is not an overweening Congress but an aggrandized executive branch; still, the remedy is the same. We should divide the executive branch between two elected officials—a president, and an attorney general who would be voted in during midterm elections.

As we are learning from the ongoing scandal of the torture memos, one of the drawbacks of a single executive is that Justice Department lawyers may consider it their job to

twist the law to suit the White House. But the president is not their client; the United States is. Justice Department lawyers appointed by an elected attorney general would have no motive to distort law and logic to empower the president, while the White House counsel’s office, which does represent the president, would have every incentive to monitor the Justice Department to ensure that it did not tilt too strongly against the executive branch. The watchmen would watch each other.

This arrangement would hardly be unprecedented: most state governments elect an attorney general. The new Article II could make clear that the president has the responsibility for setting overall legal policy, just as governors do today.

None of these changes would erode the “separation of powers.” That happens only when a change gives one branch’s prerogatives to another branch. These changes refer

in each instance back to the people, who are the proper source of all power. The changes would still leave plenty of room for “energy in the executive” but would afford far less opportunity for high-handedness, secrecy, and simple rigidity. They would allow presidential firmness, but not at the expense of democratic self-governance.

It’s not surprising that the Framers did not understand the perils of the office they designed. They were working in the dark, and they got a lot of things right. But we should not let our admiration for the Framers deter us from fixing their mistakes.

Our government is badly out of balance. There is a difference between executive energy and autocratic license; between leadership and authoritarianism; between the democratic firmness of a Lincoln and the authoritarian rigidity of a Bush. The challenge we face today is to find some advantage in Bush’s sorry legacy. Reform of the executive branch would be a good place to start. ■

Garrett Epps is a professor of law at the University of Baltimore.

Constitutional change is a daunting prospect. But consider how often we have already changed the presidency; it is the Constitution’s most-amended feature.

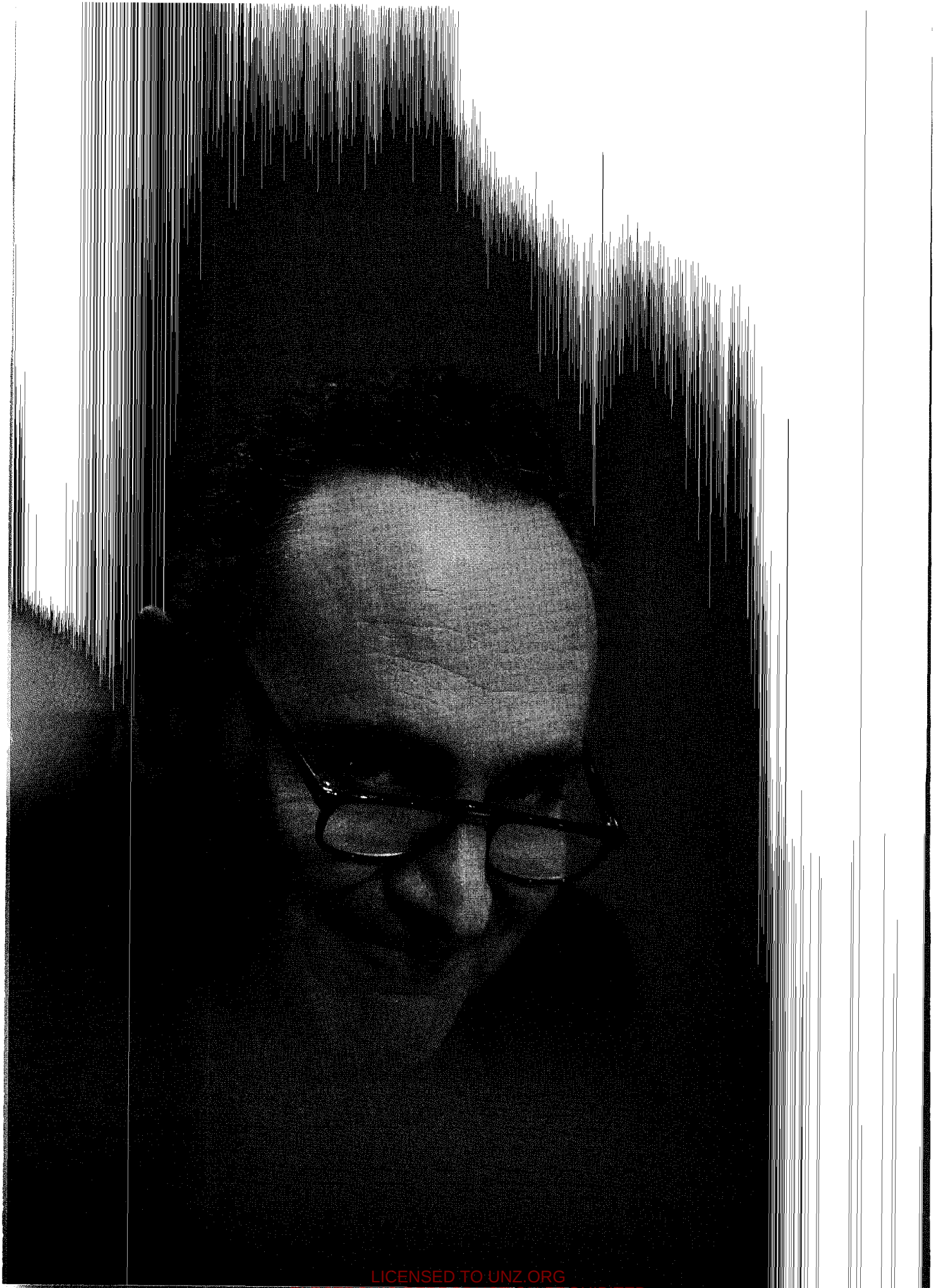
MAN IN THE MIDDLE

Joshua Green

B UZZZZZZ. THE CELL PHONE rings again and Chuck Schumer flips it open. "I figured it out," he says without preamble. "George Washington. If George Washington got indicted, you wouldn't pounce on the guy—you'd say he served humbly and was a victim of the

a call for change made more in sorrow than in anger—could do the trick, giving Alaskans "permission," in the political argot, to vote Democratic. Such an ad would require just the right touch. In fact—*Flip*. "I want sign-off on the Stevens ad." *Snap*—it could decide the race, if the jury doesn't first.

More than any other Democrat in Congress, Schumer



maybe not, his issues are issues that people in Montana find important. He focuses on values that everyone in the caucus can support." During his first two-year cycle as DSCC chairman, in 2004–2006, by what looked like sheer dint of effort, Schumer took the caucus from a perilously small 44 seats to a narrow majority, and then reenlisted for another cycle. By last fall, it was clear he would deliver again. It was also clear, as Democrats gained momentum and the economic crisis cast his ideas about the middle class into sudden stark relief, that his influence was growing.

I had come to his office intending to solicit his thoughts on how these ideas might shape the Democratic agenda. But, Washington being Washington, our discussion didn't get past the election—which was fine, because why talk about next season on the eve of the Super Bowl? Had I tried, his cell phone—an active participant in any conversation with Schumer—would have forbidden it. Its steady intrusion kept us riveted on the horse race, the minute-by-minute updates and Schumer's responses to them providing a glimpse of the man in action. Even as we spoke, he was fine-tuning the strategies of half a dozen races, summoning up a new ad, tweaking a line of attack, or absorbing the tiniest shifts in the electorate from his array of pollsters. There was a kind of majesty in the spectacle, the experience being a bit like watching some renowned master perform on one of those enormous medieval pipe organs, fingers racing up and down multiple keyboards as he reaches the crescendo.

On Election Night, Schumer made his way to the Capitol Hyatt, where several hundred Democratic staffers had gathered in the ballroom. He and Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader, had adjoining suites. All day the signs had hinted at victory, and by early evening Senate wins were rolling in: Virginia, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Colorado, North Carolina. At 10 o'clock, the Democratic congressional leaders grabbed their moment and took the stage, to wild applause. Then CNN called the election for Barack Obama, and the whole place erupted. Schumer was already back in his suite, peering through a pair of half glasses at the election results on his laptop. When the dust settled, Stevens had gone down and the Democrats (hoping that Al Franken would emerge the victor in Minnesota) held 58 seats in the Senate.

THROUGHOUT HIS CAREER, Schumer has courted the media so aggressively in all that he does that the impulse defines him. Bob Dole may have ensured this with his famous line that the most dangerous place in Washington is between Chuck Schumer and a camera. Every profile thus portrays the familiar caricature, describing, with varying degrees of fondness or disdain, a hyperambitious Brooklyn Jew forever in thrall to the spotlight, even as he is forced to exist in Hillary Clinton's shadow—a purely political creature, sometimes a figure of fun, but hardly consequential. This view of Schumer has started to fade as his colleagues (never averse to the caricature) have begun a cautious reappraisal, aware that their newly elevated status owes a lot to the clear appeal of his ideas.

Schumer's emphasis on the middle class echoes Bill Clinton's in the 1990s, but its disposition and focus are

different. Clinton operated at a time when many Democratic policies were under attack, and much of what he accomplished—on welfare reform, crime, streamlining government, and even school uniforms—can be thought of as defensive retooling of government, cleaning out the most controversial vestiges of liberal programs to bring them into line with middle-class values. By contrast, Schumer's agenda is primarily offensive, a series of mainly tax policies designed to support and encourage middle-class aspirations. The underlying rationale is to create a government that is more active on behalf of the middle class.

Schumer's political acuity is increasingly guiding Senate Democrats. The new president—until recently, one of them—seems to be listening, too. This is significant because Schumer is steering toward a slightly different spot from the one Democrats have traditionally aimed for. He attributes his success these past four years to a small but critical insight into the nature of the American middle class: namely, that it is more affluent and doesn't want the same things from government as does the "middle class" as normally conceived by politicians, policy makers, and academics. Schumer sees this group as the key to the electoral balance of power, and believes he has figured out how to reach it. The composition of the Senate is a strong indicator that he may be on to something.

Whether he can carry his ideas forward in the new Congress and convince others of their merit could go a long way toward determining whether Democrats will flourish under President Obama. Early signs are positive. But Schumer believes that much more than immediate success is at stake. If Democrats can strengthen the bond between government and the middle class as he identifies it—and if he can find the right touch—this new Democratic era will not vanish quickly, as the last one did, but endure for a generation or longer.

WHEN I RETURNED to see him just after the election, Schumer had the satisfied air of someone who feels thoroughly vindicated. The middle class had delivered a broad Democratic sweep, ratifying his view that the country had reached a pivotal moment. The Republican era that began in 1980 with Ronald Reagan had come to an end. "This almost always happens when people redefine their relationship to government," he told me. Schumer saw the presidential election as having turned on the simple question of which candidate recognized this new relationship. "You look at just about every policy difference between Obama and McCain," he said. "Underlying it was a more active government."

When Democrats hear the phrase *more active government*, all sorts of well-established programs leap to mind. Schumer is dubious of them, and focuses instead on his idea of a redefined relationship. The last time voters redefined their relationship to government, in 1980, they wanted less of it: fed up with an onerous, spendthrift bureaucracy, the middle class chose Reagan, who promised to "get government off your back." Schumer believes that the reason Republicans dominated for the past 28 years is that the standard Democratic agenda, though intended to serve the broad middle class, has

too often missed the mark. To satisfy an electorate now eager for government to do more and not less, Schumer believes that his party must recognize how it erred over the past three decades. This entails changing the way Democrats think about the middle class and introducing new policies to serve it.

"A lot of times, what Democrats say are the struggles of the middle class are not really the struggles of the middle class," says Jim Kessler, a longtime Schumer adviser and a vice president of Third Way, a centrist Washington think tank. "They're the struggles of people who are actually poor. So when people in the middle class hear you talking about these things and calling them middle-class problems, they actually think you're talking about someone else's problems."

As Schumer explains the problem, the median household income in the United States is \$48,000. Most of the programs Democrats vociferously tout aim to help people slightly below this economic stratum: Pell Grants, the Earned Income Tax Credit, the increased minimum wage. Each is worthy, Schumer says, but the programs don't reach people in the middle class. The problem lies in the assumption that \$48,000 is the right income level at which to find them.

The median-household-income statistic is too blunt an instrument, because it includes households headed by 20-year-olds (i.e., students) as well as 90-year-olds (i.e., retirees). If you earn \$48,000 at 20, you're doing fine and don't need government help; at 90, you're on a fixed income and have different needs (and more options) from government than someone younger. According to an analysis by Third Way, the median household income for people ages 25 to 60, the prime working years, is about \$68,000; if they're married, it's about \$78,000. If both spouses earn income at some point during the year, the number rises to \$85,000. So the "middle class" most Democratic politicians imagine—that is, typical working-age families—is actually much higher on the income ladder than they realize, somewhere more in the range of \$60,000 to \$100,000.

This has important policy implications, because most of these households don't qualify for the government programs Democrats are likeliest to bring up. "People who make \$80,000 a year expect to be solidly middle class," Elizabeth Warren, a Harvard Law School professor whose studies of the middle class have strongly influenced Schumer, told me. "They're making more than their parents did, but they also work harder and they're much less secure—laying out a king's ransom to buy a house where they feel they need to live for their kids to get a good education. That's a wholly different set of issues than living on the margin of poverty." These are the people Schumer says Democrats need to help. "Too often, the focus is on the top 10 percent, who don't need it, or the bottom 10 percent," Schumer says. "The broad middle is forgotten."

Democrats hurt themselves not only by talking past these core constituents but by appearing to talk down to them. Schumer, whose faith in his sense of the authentic is absolute, is every bit as attuned to perceived Democratic elitism

as Fox News is. "Democrats make a huge mistake when they condescend to the middle class," he told me, putting on a look of exaggerated pity: "Oh, you poor middle-class people!" In his 2006 book, *Positively American*, Schumer notes that Democrats who visit middle-class communities often vow to improve "the crumbling public schools." This sort of talk exasperates him. In a typical middle-class neighborhood, he points out, "the school is not crumbling; it's just becoming crushingly okay." Crumbling schools are in poor neighborhoods. So even well-meaning Democrats unwittingly offend by revealing their ignorance of true middle-class concerns. This is why they lose elections.

Under George W. Bush, of course, things got so bad for the middle class—real and imaginary—that Democrats won control of government practically by default. To hold onto it, Schumer believes, the party will have to avoid the mistake it made the last time it ran Congress and the White House.

In 1993, Bill Clinton took office after campaigning on a middle-class tax cut, and then launched into a fight over gays in the military and quarreled with Congress. "The people who elected him," Schumer says, "didn't think they mattered," and brought Democratic control to a swift end the following year. The shame of it, he adds, is that Clinton realized his mistake and had already begun hitting his stride, with middle-class-friendly programs like the Family and Medical Leave Act and the 1994 crime bill (which Schumer helped shape) that put 100,000 more police officers on the street. Even so, it took Democrats more than a decade to recover their majorities in Congress.

As one of the principal architects of that effort, Schumer would appear well qualified to judge what Democrats should do next. What would a Schumer-worthy agenda look like? For starters, it would be determinedly practical, tightly focused on the needs of the real middle class. It would account for the popular mood, taking care to lean slightly against liberal orthodoxy and the interest groups that enforce it. Emphasis would fall less on providing a safety net and more on

helping people get ahead—with a house, a college degree, a comfortable retirement. To maintain solidarity with regular folks, it would feature the occasional, well-chosen populist crusade. And so it would look a lot like Schumer's own career.

Schumer came to Washington in 1980, at the same time as Reagan. As the congressman from a working-class Brooklyn district, he took up prominent local concerns like crime and welfare reform. He carved out a role shaping laws like the federal assault-weapons ban, the Violence Against Women Act, the 1992 Anti-Auto Theft Act, which required manufacturers to put ID numbers on car parts to make them easier to track. But his specialty became the modest, life-enhancing consumer protections whose practical appeal is not always reflected in the number of headlines they garner: limiting ATM and debit-card fees; making cell-phone numbers portable; forcing credit-card companies to disclose more information. The section on your credit-card bill listing the interest rate, annual fee, and finance charges is known as

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the “Schumer Box,” for a provision he inserted into the 1988 Truth in Lending Act. A classic episode in the mid-1990s was Schumer’s campaign against the high price of breakfast cereals (cold cereal is Schumer’s favorite food). A Federal Trade Commission investigation that he helped launch attributed the sharp rise in cereal prices to “slotting fees,” the price manufacturers pay for prime placement on supermarket shelves; after an uproar in Congress, prices fell.

Hardly content to toil in obscurity, Schumer honed his ability to insert himself front and center into the biggest issues of the day. From his seat on the House Budget Committee, he maneuvered to play a leading role in the drama that surrounded the country’s last great financial crisis, the savings-and-loan scandal of the late 1980s. He chaired the Task Force on Urgent Fiscal Matters, a high-profile investigation of what went wrong that culminated in a blockbuster hearing—the sort of plum assignment that is the congressional equivalent of starring in a big-budget Hollywood action movie. He learned the ins and outs of Wall Street, and showed a flair for theatrics.

In 1998, Schumer moved up to the Senate, knocking off the heavily favored Geraldine Ferraro in the Democratic primary to beat the three-term incumbent, Alfonse D’Amato. His campaign was pure Schumer, focused on things like skyrocketing college tuition and the exorbitant airfares to and from midsize cities like Buffalo and Rochester.

In the Senate, he has pushed programs aimed at overcoming the major obstacles and fulfilling the aspirations of middle-class life: buying a home (a first-time homebuyer’s tax credit), having children (doubling the child tax credit, extending the credit for child-care expenses to families earning up to \$75,000), paying for college (making tuition tax-deductible), caring for aging parents (extending the dependent-care tax credit to cover elderly parents living outside the home). A nearly identical agenda featured prominently in the campaigns that Schumer ran from the DSCC, reproduced so faithfully that he was able to introduce the package as a bill, the Middle Class Opportunity Act of 2007, which virtually every freshman Democratic senator co-sponsored. “Even though he’s brash,” Jim Kessler says, “a lot of the things he’s calling for are not really radical.” Schumer’s ultimate fantasy, described in *Positively American*, is to slay that great middle-class bogeyman, the property tax, by decoupling it from local education funding. This would eliminate the major reason for property-tax increases, allowing middle-class families to buy homes in affordable neighborhoods without worrying about school quality, and it would restructure the public school system in a more egalitarian manner. Schumer’s ability to grasp middle-class concerns made him enormously popular in New York. When he was reelected in 2004, he won by the largest margin in state history.

It is a measure of Schumer’s intuition that he almost never gets caught on the wrong side of an issue. Nor is he above posturing to rile up voters—in fact, he has done so to ruthless effect. He turned his chairmanship of the Joint Economic Committee, normally an obscure backwater, into a platform to agitate against high gasoline prices, though Congress can do little to affect them. To hammer Republicans just before the 2006 midterm elections, he made devastating use of the

news that a state-owned Dubai company planned to take control of shipping terminals in six U.S. seaports—even though he, a Wall Street sophisticate, understood that such transactions were not uncommon, if rarely quite so explicit. Indeed, he had actively supported others, recognizing their benefit to his constituents. “As a larger-gauge strategist,” a senior banking official with a high-level Washington background told me, “he has an uncanny sense of how to position himself, and his party, in a way that resonates with voters.”

Throughout all this, Schumer has been known for his relentless drive and aggressiveness, but almost never for what he is driving to pass. The mundane nature of the middle-class initiatives he favors is a built-in disadvantage, holding little interest for the people who think and write about policy for a living—the sort of people who prefer to dwell on crumbling schools. This reinforces the image of Schumer as something of a lightweight. “Lemme tell you,” he said with more than his usual gusto, when I pointed this out, “I had a big argument with the *New York Times* editorial board when I started pushing college-tuition deductibility. They wrote an editorial saying [middle-class people] don’t need it. Give it all to the poor. I called them up and said, ‘First, you don’t understand that someone making \$68,000 and paying \$20,000 a year for tuition feels every bit as poor as somebody who’s making \$22,000 and doesn’t have to pay any tuition. And second, if [Democrats] listened to you, we’d have 35 seats in the Senate and you’d criticize us for being ineffective.’ From those people in the, quote, liberal elite, there is almost something bad about trying to help the middle class.”

It is this liberal-elite mind-set that Schumer has spent a career trying to overcome, that two cycles’ worth of Democratic Senate candidates schooled in the Schumer Method have successfully avoided, and that Barack Obama—after a worrisome start in which he appeared captive to it—also avoided, by shrewdly making elite liberals part of a much broader movement that swept right through the heart of the middle class. One reason Schumer is sanguine these days is because of his faith that Obama gets it.

Take cereal prices. “I can’t tell you how many people came up to me and said, ‘Thanks for doing what you did on cereal prices,’” Schumer told me. “Now, that is hardly the most important thing you can do. But I would resent some editorial writer or professor saying”—and here he put on an expression of snooty disdain—“‘Oh, he’s talking about cereal prices!’ I’ll tell you what. Government helped people on that. *The New York Times* wouldn’t understand that. Bush would say, ‘It’s up to the free market.’ But if I told that to Barack Obama, he’d understand it like that.” Schumer snapped his fingers.

LAST FALL, AS the economic crisis intensified, a behind-the-scenes struggle opened up in the Democratic Party between fiscal hawks, who considered the Bush administration’s \$700 billion financial-bailout package a major limitation on what the next president could propose, and others, like Schumer, who saw the crisis as license to abandon normal fiscal constraints. By Thanksgiving, most Democrats were lining up with Schumer. The question now is not whether to spend generously but how much to spend and on what.

When Bill Clinton took office, 16 years ago, he found himself facing a growing federal deficit and abandoned his middle-class tax cut to focus on balancing the budget. Even though the deficit is much larger today, Obama won't have to confront this dilemma. Instead, the imperative throughout Washington is to spend (and spend, and spend!) the country's way out of recession. On this, Obama doesn't just have a mandate; he has something more like a directive.

A few weeks ago, while everyone was focused on the stimulus package, Schumer walked me through what he thinks the first year of the Obama administration might look like and why it will appeal to his idea of the middle class.

"First, you've got to get the economy moving again," he said. "You do that with a big stimulus and get money into people's hands." One likely component is a middle-class tax cut. To broaden support for the large stimulus he favors, Schumer was also pushing provisions to increase middle-class savings and eventually tame the deficit: government-funded "baby bonds" of \$500 for every new child, matching federal funds to 401(k)s, and automatic IRA accounts for workers whose employers don't offer a 401(k). A well-designed stimulus, he said, would quickly rebuild confidence in government.

Schumer listed five things that should follow simultaneously, indicating that each enjoys at least a rough Democratic consensus. Reforming the financial industry would further increase confidence and allay middle-class worries about mortgages and retirement accounts. An energy plan that takes steps to reduce dependence on foreign oil and to promote green alternatives would convince a middle class spooked by \$4-a-gallon gasoline that, even if the government cannot control market volatility and prices in the short term, it is taking concrete steps toward solving the problem. On education, Obama has proposed more federal dollars for grades K-12 to attract better teachers and improve schools without raising property taxes, and a tax credit to make college more affordable. An immigration bill similar to what Ted Kennedy and John McCain proposed might upset interest groups on the left and right, but it would appeal to small businesses (i.e., middle-class entrepreneurs) and convince everyone else that government finally had a handle on the problem.

The last issue is withdrawal from Iraq. "I think we're going to do Iraq early," Schumer said. "What the right wing didn't get was that even if the surge succeeded, it was beside the point. People said to themselves, 'There's \$100 billion a year going over there, when I'm hurting? For what, stability in Iraq?' I ask people, 'How many's first goal is stability in Iraq?' No one raises their hand. Well, why are we spending more money on that than on all of federal education?"

All of this could be accomplished within the first three months of the Obama administration, he suggested. Were that to happen, the middle class would have the activist government Schumer says it wants, behaving exactly the way Schumer wants it to. "Every one of those things either helps the middle class immediately, or gives them hope in the future

that the pie is going to keep growing," he said. That would open the door to bigger things later in the year, like universal health care and ambitious climate-change legislation.

Schumer says that middle-class problems have expanded to the point that they've begun to overlap with the problems of the poor and working poor—and middle-class families lack recourse to the government programs that help the poor. "Twenty years ago, most middle-class people didn't worry about health care," he told me. "Today, the person making \$70,000 thinks about health care as much as the person making \$35,000." Far from being adversaries, both groups favor things like better schools and reasonable gas prices. "What will happen if we do it right," he said, "is that there'll be an alliance between the middle class and the poor, as opposed to the alliance between the middle class and the rich [that held for the past 28 years]. Everything we're talking about is the work of an active, strong government, and if it works, it will wed the middle class to the Democrats for a generation."

People think big at the outset of any new administration. Eight years ago, Karl Rove was plotting to bring about a generation-long Republican majority with a set of ideas that sounded pretty convincing. That didn't work out so well. And Rove was operating at a time of relative peace and prosperity. Some unforeseen crisis or error by Obama—or a crisis in plain sight, like a long, grinding recession—could hamper Democrats and render Schumer no more of a visionary than Rove.

What sank Rove's grand plan was Bush's inability to get any of its component parts through Congress. But that problem is unlikely to befall Obama. He has already filled many of the top administration jobs with seasoned congressional veterans, notably his chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel. Before leaving Congress to join the administration, Emanuel was the Democrat who most shared Schumer's obsessive focus on aspirational middle-class programs.

Obama also seems to want to govern by enunciating broad themes and relying on Congress to fill in many of the specifics. After two terms of a Republican president who showed little regard for the legislative branch, Congress is eager to oblige. As a member of the Democratic leadership, Schumer will be central to the process, and he has logged enough phone time with senior Obama officials to become convinced that the new president shares his worldview.

So Obama not only has money to spend but looks certain, at least initially, to enjoy better relations with Congress than any president in decades. That ought to provide a good head start toward enacting an ambitious agenda—as good as any president has had since Lyndon Johnson.

The last time I saw Schumer, he had just announced his decision to forgo a third term as DSCC chairman. The time had come to test his ideas in the legislative arena. Having at last gained control of government, Schumer and his party must now show that they know how to keep it. ■

Joshua Green is an Atlantic senior editor.

**AIRDES
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In the seconds between the return from the two-minute-warning commercial break and the snap of the ball to Giants quarterback Eli Manning, as play-by-play man Greg Gumbel quickly oriented the audience—*It has been a dandy here at Giants Stadium. Two minutes to play. Bengals by four. Giants at the six-yard line. Second and goal. The Giants have one time-out remaining*—the following scene-setting images flashed past in rapid succession:

- A high, wide shot of the stadium and the walls of cheering fans;
- Bengals quarterback Carson Palmer watching anxiously from the sidelines;
- Bengals coach Marvin Lewis looking perplexed on the sidelines;
- Giants coach Tom Coughlin, head down, talking intently into his headset microphone;
- On the field, a close-up of Bengals middle linebacker Dhani Jones pointing urgently to his teammates and shouting, positioning them for the snap;
- Manning shouting and gesturing behind center;
- Giants wide receiver Plaxico Burress lined up in the slot, poised, looking back toward Manning; and
- A wide shot showing the complete line of scrimmage as the ball is snapped and the play begins.

Roll back to the beginning of this brief sequence, and here is how it sounded inside the windowless production trailer parked outside the stadium, where two rows of technicians sat beneath the glow of 100 TV monitors, 20 screens across stacked five deep. Staring at this wall were three men: producer Mark Wolff on the left; technical director Dennis Stone on the right; and between them the show's impresario, its director, Bob Fishman, known as "Fish."

Just before coming back on air from the commercial, the crew counted down in unison:

"Five!"

"Four!"

"Three!"

Wolff shouted, "Fish is going to cut some shots!"

"Two!"

"One!"

"Aaaand go!" shouted Fish, a wiry man in faded blue jeans and a loose-fitting, long-sleeved cotton shirt, a headset clamped over a baseball cap. He was leaning up and out of his swivel chair, choosing shots and barking orders, arms elevated, snapping his long fingers loudly with each new command. "Go fan shot! Ready four. Take four! Ready eight. Take eight! Ready one. Take one! Ready 12. Take 12! Ready five. Take five! Ready three—ready two. Take two! Ready three. Take three!"

Camera three, which Fish returned to just before the snap of the ball, offers a wide angle from above that's used to frame the play. In this case, with one eye on the play clock, Fish snuck in one last scene-setting image—Burress lined up and looking back toward his quarterback—before returning to the wide angle as the ball was snapped.

This was just 30 seconds. The entire broadcast would last more than three and a half hours.

IF THE PRODUCTION crew of a televised football game is like a symphony orchestra, Bob Fishman is its conductor. He sits front and center in the dark trailer, insulated from the sunshine and the roar of the crowd, taking the fragments of sounds and moving images and assembling the broadcast on the fly, mediating the real event into the digital one. He scans the dizzying bank of screens to select the next shot, and the next, and the next, layering in replays, graphics, and sound, barking his orders via headset to his crew, plugging into a rhythm that echoes the pulse of the game.

Every bit as much as the athletic contest on the field, this is a performance, an improvisation, a largely unheralded art form peculiar to the modern age. Wolff is in charge of the broadcast; Gumbel and analyst Dan Dierdorf are its voices and faces, but their work exists to complement the show Fish orchestrates onscreen. Having once seen him in action, having peeked behind the curtain in the Palace of Oz, I can hardly watch any other sporting event on TV without picturing this frantic, sinewy 59-year-old man calling shot after shot after shot, half-sitting and half-standing, the dervish behind the professional program smoothly unspooling in your living room and in your brain.

Recently, some cable and satellite companies began offering viewers a chance to, in effect, direct their own experience of a game by selecting camera angles, isolated shots, and replays as they wish. This may satisfy a few eccentric fans who prefer, say, to watch a middle linebacker's-eye view for an entire game, but it suggests a failure to grasp the level of difficulty involved in what happens in that production trailer every Sunday. The television crews don't just broadcast games, they inhabit them. They know the players, the teams, the stats, and the strategies. They interview players and coaches the day before the game. They brainstorm, anticipate, plot likely story lines, prepare graphic packages of important stats, and bundle replays from previous contests to bring a sense of history and context to the event. They are not just pointing cameras and broadcasting the feed, they are telling the story of the game as it happens.

And at the center of their effort is the director, Fish, who seems a more agreeable version of the finicky, exasperated comedian Larry David, whom he resembles, right down to the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* logo on the baseball cap he wears pulled down to his eyebrows. He peers out at the world through wire-rimmed glasses; plays guitar in a group of aging rockers; and loves to talk music, film, politics, journalism ... but mostly, he loves to talk sports. He has won 11 Emmys, and justly so: for those who regard Sunday afternoons in football season as sacred, Fish is nothing less than a high priest.

His camera operators revere him. Out of Fish's earshot they have nothing but praise for him, and this from men (and one woman) with the blue-collar worker's hearty, time-honored disdain for the boss.

"Most of them are assholes," said one, sitting at a round table with four fellow operators, who all nodded in agreement.

"Fish is the best," the same cameraman explained.

"He appreciates what you bring to the job," said another.

"Suppose a defensive back makes an interception," said the first. "At some point, I know, they are going to want to

come back to a close-up of him. So when I know they are on another shot, I'll use those seconds to start panning up and down the sidelines, looking for him. Fish knows what I'm doing. Another director might say, 'We don't need that now,' and they wouldn't say it nice, either. I'm thinking, *No shit, but you're going to ask for the shot in 45 seconds, and you're going to get pissed off if I spend 15 seconds panning around looking for the guy.*"

"He never gets excited," says another, "and he has this ability to see *everything*. If you have a good shot, he not only notices it, he uses it. Other directors might say, 'Wow, that's really nice,' and never work it into the broadcast. Fish pulls the trigger."

THE FIRST MAJOR event Bob Fishman directed was the Apollo 17 moon launch on December 7, 1972, when the assigned director fell ill and Fish was the only CBS employee in the NASA press grandstand with a Directors Guild membership card. People noticed that he was good at it. He shifted from news to sports in 1976, and since then he has conducted basketball, football, baseball, auto racing, and Olympic events, as one of a small corps of specialists who assemble and deliver the programs for which the networks pay billions.

Fish grew up in the Virgin Islands, part of a Jewish family that owned a big vacation hotel, a sports-crazy kid with no local teams to follow. For him, pro sports have always been synonymous with television, and like any sincere professional, he cares a great deal about the medium's aesthetics and standards. Nothing annoys him more these days than broadcasts—he mentions the name of one rival network (Fox) with particular disdain—that exhibit a faddish desire to neglect on-the-field action for reaction shots from the crowd. He cites with particular horror one NCAA play-off game on ESPN when the director routinely cut away from the court after a basket was scored to show fan reactions, and thus missed a historically well-executed full-court press.

"There were seven steals!" he says. "Seven! Five of them resulted in baskets!" The team repeatedly stealing the ball was Kentucky, "and *everybody* knew that they always applied a full-court press after a basket! The steals were critical to their success in the game, and the audience didn't even see them!"

It was love at first sight when television met football for the first time, in 1939, in a game between Fordham University and Waynesburg College. Even though there was only one camera, mounted on a platform on the sidelines, the magic was apparent. Fans at home enjoyed a view comparable to those of the coaches on the sidelines, and potential sponsors quickly realized that just as baseball came with built-in commercial breaks between innings, football afforded commercial opportunities between quarters and during time-outs.

Nineteen years later, when almost 50 million people, the largest crowd ever to witness a football game, watched the

Baltimore Colts beat the Giants in overtime for the 1958 NFL championship, NBC had four cameras trained on the field, and a fifth pointed at an easel with cards reading FIRST QUARTER, SECOND QUARTER, etc. Slow-motion replays and isolated shots were still in the future, but by then the sport and the medium were effectively engaged.

By the time Fish moved from news to sports in the mid-'70s, the union was complete. Since then, broadcast dollars have helped turn players into multimillionaires and owners into billionaires. The medium has infiltrated the game itself, from TV time-outs, when players mingle aimlessly on the field waiting for commercials to end, to coaches' challenges that rely on footage from network cameras to revisit questionable referee decisions. On the sidelines, coaches and players scrutinize shots from overhead cameras to study tactics and plot countermoves. Viewers watching at home see virtual bands drawn across the field denoting the lines of scrimmage and the first-down marker, and they can refer anytime to a floating graphic in an upper corner of the screen that displays the score, time remaining, and down and distance.

It's become so hard to imagine NFL football without television that when a power failure shut down all of CBS's cameras at a packed Ralph Wilson Stadium in Buffalo earlier this season, just minutes before kickoff, the first reaction from Mark Wolff, the stunned producer in the trailer, was "There's *no way* they are playing this game."

"Mark, there are more than 70,000 paying customers waiting for kickoff in there," I said. "They have two teams, officials, whistles ... Why wouldn't they play the game?"

"It's just like a weather delay," insisted Wolff. "They'll wait until we have the power back, and then they'll play."

That day, Wolff was wrong; they kicked off on time in Buffalo and played much of the game without power, no doubt because CBS had several other regional games to offer its viewers. But if the same thing had happened on a Sunday night or Monday night, or on a play-off weekend, or, God forbid, before the Super Bowl, when the whole world is waiting

with its bowls of popcorn, kicking off without the cameras might well have provoked worldwide rioting.

Up to 20 cameras and 40 replay machines are employed in the broadcast of big games, offering views and replays of the action from every conceivable angle. Even with all this, the networks constantly strain to find newfangled gadgets to distinguish their coverage. Cameras have been suspended from cables over the field or, in one silly innovation, mounted on the players themselves—the short-lived XFL's "Helmetcam"—which on a running back typically delivered a violently jerky, incoherent swirl of bodies culminating in a close-up of the turf. In the Giants-Bengals game, CBS was experimenting with something called "Flow Motion," which employs GPS and replay technology to track the movements of players. Fish had used it the previous month while broadcasting U.S. Open tennis, where it charted the labyrinthine path traced

Every bit as much as the contest on the field, broadcasting an NFL game is a performance, a largely unheralded art form unique to the modern age.

by, say, Roger Federer during a long, hard-played point. But the system turns out to have little application to the gridiron, where the only distances that matter are measured by hash marks in the grass.

Cutbacks at CBS have reduced what Fish has to work with in regular-season games. There are the three primary cameras, positioned on platforms at the mezzanine level, peering down over the sideline. These are set 30 yards apart, with camera two in the middle over the 50-yard line. Before each snap of the ball, Fish designates which camera operator will cover the action—generally the one closest to the ball—and the other two operators move their cameras to specific assignments. (One may focus on the defense, for instance, while the other isolates the far receiver.) Camera four is high behind the eastern end zone, and on each play, it frames the middle of the offensive line and then follows the ball, providing another high angle on the action for replay purposes. Camera five sits on a rolling platform behind the visiting bench and moves on a track from one end of the field to the other, giving a field-level view of the action. It is usually positioned about five yards ahead of the line of scrimmage, but when the offense is in the “red zone” (that is, inside the opposing team’s 20-yard line), it sits even with the goal line to provide a clear look at whether the ball crosses over for a touchdown.

These are the basics, cameras one through five, that are used to cover every televised football game, college or pro. The rest are specialty cameras. Six and eight are mounted on three-foot-high platforms behind each end zone, to one side of the goalposts. Camera six is equipped with “Super Slo-Mo,” which during baseball broadcasts can capture the spinning seams of a slider approaching home plate at nearly 90 miles per hour. Fish will sometimes instruct these cameras’ operators to focus on specific players—in this game they were Justin Tuck, the Giants’ gifted pass-rushing end, and Bengals receiver Chad Johnson—in order to put together a video package that summarizes those players’ ups and downs during the game.

Camera seven is roving and handheld, good for close-ups of players and coaches on the sidelines, or of fans in the lower seats, or just to find the eye candy Fish uses to segue into and out of commercial breaks. High at one corner of the end zone is camera 12, or the “slash” camera (since this was just a regular-season game, there were no cameras nine, 10, and 11), which on most plays isolates the slot receiver or, if there is none, the middle linebacker. With the slash camera, camera five, and two of the primary cameras all focusing on individual receivers, it’s pretty much guaranteed that on every passing play, the broadcast will have an isolated shot of the quarterback’s target. On these shots, the camera operators know to frame the receiver from head to toe, and to keep the defender in the picture, so that on replay it’s clear whether the pass catcher’s feet were in-bounds, or whether there was pass interference. (The cameras are operated by a core crew that travels each week with the CBS technicians, and by a handful of local pros who sign on for single games.)

The pregame sit-downs with players and coaches are fishing expeditions, chances for the CBS team to pick up on crucial details and story lines.

There are other cameras: one called “All-22,” which shoots the whole field from a fixed position high above; one in the booth for when Gumbel and Dierdorf are onscreen; and for this game, one in the blimp hovering over the stadium, which was providing stunning September-afternoon vistas of Manhattan and northern New Jersey. And there’s footage that doesn’t come directly from the cameras—graphics packages, replays, preprepared features about specific players or situations, and so forth—all of which is supervised by Wolff.

But the cameras are all, of course, just tools. The goal is to tell stories with them. The game itself is the primary story, but within it are dozens of subplots. Hence the importance of the pregame sit-downs with players and coaches, which are essentially fishing expeditions for the CBS team—chances to pick up on potential story lines and revealing details that can be worked into the broadcast.

The ideal interviewee is someone like Bengals wide receiver Johnson, a ruthlessly candid player who began his session with Dierdorf, Gumbel, Fish, and Wolff by dramatically asking the Bengals’ PR rep to leave the room. The Giants came into that Sunday riding high—counting their march to the Super Bowl victory the previous winter, they had won six straight games—but Johnson’s Bengals were desperate for a win. They were coming off a losing season, and they’d dropped their first two games. In his conversation with the CBS team the day before the Giants game, Johnson quickly served up a dire prediction: “If we lose tomorrow, we have a chance of going 0-and-8. It don’t get any easier.” (Dire and prescient: the Bengals would not win their first game until the ninth week of the season, over the Jacksonville Jaguars.)

Johnson has a genius for drawing attention to himself. The previous week, he had stirred things up by suggesting publicly that his team’s offense was struggling because of poor pass-blocking by the team’s offensive line.

In the pregame conversation, Dierdorf, a Hall of Fame offensive lineman with deep knowledge of the game, who knew that such comments drive the big men crazy, asked if the Bengals blockers had “gotten their noses out of joint.”

“They better not. Get mad at what?” Johnson asked. “This ain’t no fucking time to be sensitive! It’s time to play. If they ain’t blocking, my ass is gonna look bad.”

Johnson, who had yet to catch a touchdown pass in 2008, had also engineered a stunt guaranteed to keep him on the flapping lips of every sports-talk radio and TV host in the country. He had legally changed his name to a Spanish version of the number on his jersey, 85. He was now officially “Ocho-Cinco,” although the NFL marketing division had ruled that the name on his uniform would have to stay “C. Johnson” unless he wanted to reimburse Reebok for its stock of unsold jerseys with that name stitched on the back.

Dierdorf and Gumbel pounced on the name change.

“What do you do when somebody goes, ‘Oh, there’s Chad Johnson!’ How do you respond to that?” Dierdorf asked.

Johnson just shrugged and smiled.

"Do you say, 'No, that's not my name anymore'?"
"No," Johnson said, shaking his head with disbelief. "I'm not that serious about it, man."

"What do you want us to call you tomorrow?" Dierdorf asked.

"It's on you."

"It's your life," Dierdorf said. "Your name."

"Hey, it's not that serious!" Johnson protested, dismayed at having to explain the joke. "Call me Chad."

"Did you have your credit cards and driver's license changed?" Gumbel asked.

Johnson looked pained—a wit trapped in a world with no sense of humor. "No, man, I did it to have the name changed on my jersey, that's it. And they messed it up. I'm not sure what they're doing, I just know that they boosted sales of my jersey back to No. 1. It's a money issue."

Then Ocho-Cinco, or Johnson, or Chad, ever the showman, left the broadcasters with a tantalizing tip for their broadcast.

"Here's a hint," he said. "The first play of the game. I'll leave it at that. Don't tell anybody."

THE NEXT MORNING, Fish passed this bit of inside dope along to his camera crew.

"I will tell you this," he said. "Whoever is doing far receiver or near receiver, Chad Johnson, whether we can believe him or not, whether it's the typical player bullshit they give the press, watch for a deep pattern, a deep pass, on the first play from scrimmage ... I think they are going to go deep. Johnson says, 'Just make sure you cover me on the first play.' That may have just been blah-blah-blah-blah, but actually, some guys tell you the truth and that actually happens."

When the Bengals took possession for the first time in the game, the TV crew was poised. Moments before coming back from a commercial, Fish reminded his camera operators, "Okay, guys, let's watch Chad Johnson on this first play."

In unison, the voices in the trailer counted down the seconds to the return from commercial, "Six. Five. Four."

"Stand by," said Fish. "Slow push in."

"Three. Two. One."

"Ready five [a close-up of Carson Palmer breaking the offensive huddle]," said Fish. "Aaaaand take five!"

The music started, and as the Bengals quarterback positioned himself over center, Gumbel intoned, *Carson Palmer looking for a breakout game today. He has been very un-Carson Palmerlike so far. No TDs, three picks.*

"Ready three [the play-by-play camera]. Take three!" said Fish, and then, noting the Bengals' formation, added, "Two wides! Two wides, that's all."

Let's see if the Bengals try to jump on the Giants in a hurry, said Gumbel, like a man who knew something his viewers did not.

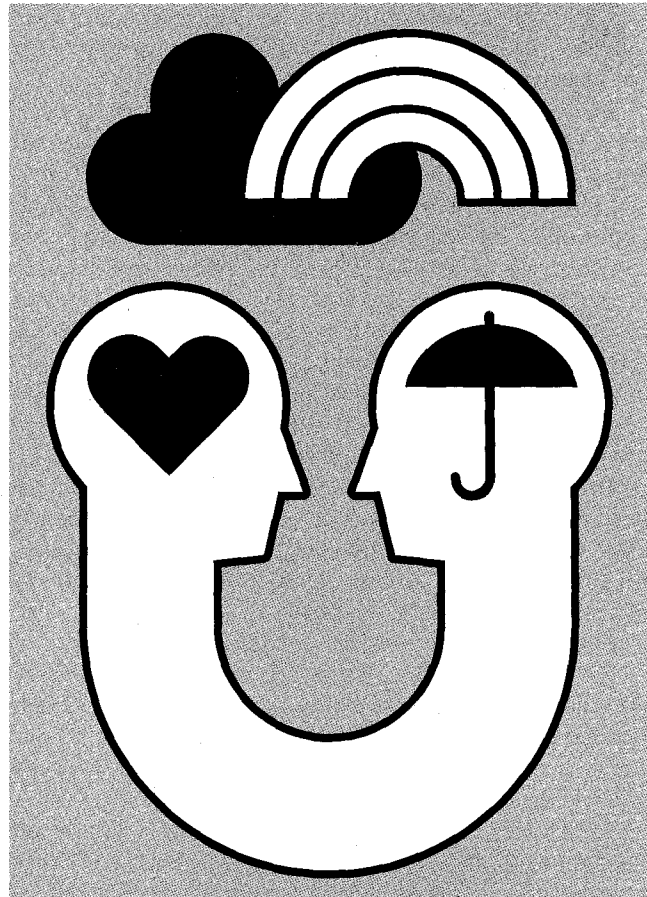
The ball was snapped.

Fish: "Pass! Here it is!"

Only, here it wasn't. Johnson was racing deep, but the Giants defensive line swamped the quarterback immediately, dropping him for a six-yard loss.

Palmer under pressure, trying to get away, and can't! Gumbel said.

GALLERY BAD WEATHER by Anthony Burrill



Fish: "Ready eight [a close-up of Palmer with his face in the turf]. Take eight! Ready two [standing Giants fans clapping and cheering]. Take two! Ready five [a close-up of Palmer getting to his feet]. Take five! Ready four [Giants tackle Fred Robbins, who got the sack]. Take four!"

Chad Johnson was flying up the left side, Gumbel said. Palmer couldn't get it away.

There was no chance of completing a pass, Dierdorf said. He was fighting just to stay up.

Fish: "Hold four [Robbins lining up for the next play]. Hold four."

The Bengals would end this first offensive series backed up against their own goal line, 20 yards behind where they started—victims of a sack, a penalty (on the offensive line), and a second Giants rush that forced Palmer to fumble the ball, which Cincinnati recovered. The frustration and disappointment on the field were mirrored in the broadcast booth and in the trailer, where Cincinnati's failure to execute had cost them the chance to show how on top of a big play they were.

The whole thing seemed like the Bengals' sorry season in a nutshell, underlining the truth of Johnson's impolitic insight: no blocking meant no throws, which meant no big plays. As the punt team lined up, Fish called for a shot of the Cincinnati receiver and quarterback walking off the field together.

THE BIGGEST FEAR of any broadcast team is a blowout. The audience changes the channel, and even the camera operators have trouble keeping their heads in the game. "You just want to get the hell out of there and move on to next week, because the game sucks," says Fish.

But in spite of the inauspicious start, the Giants-Bengals game turned out to be a terrific matchup, all the more so for being unexpected. "On any given Sunday ...," the adage goes, and in this one the winless Bengals found themselves four points up on the champs, 20-16, with less than two minutes to play. As the Giants conferred during a Cincinnati time-out, preparing to attempt a go-ahead touchdown, the trailer was humming at a climactic pitch. Amid overlapping conversations, sound effects, and shouted instructions from the rows of technicians, Wolff primed his broadcasters and replay operators, and Fish, standing now, barked instructions and waved his hands to some rapid internal rhythm:

"Ready two [Bengals coach Marvin Lewis talking into his headset microphone]. Take two! Ready one [Carson Palmer craning his neck to see the field]. Take one! Ready 12 [Eli Manning walking toward the sidelines to confer with Giants offensive coordinator Kevin Gilbride]. Take 12!"

He's pretty cool for someone so young, Gumbel said.

Well, it's in his DNA, Dierdorf replied. (Manning, as most NFL fans know, is the son of former New Orleans Saints quarterback Archie, and the kid brother of Indianapolis Colts star quarterback Peyton.) *I don't think we should be surprised. This is a regular-season game. They are 2-and-0.*

Fish: "Ready eight [Lewis from a fresh angle]. Take eight! Ready four [Manning trotting back out to the field]. Take four! Ready five [a field shot from ground level]. Take five! Ready ... aaah ... eight [Manning from another angle]. Take eight! ... Ready fou—five [another shot of Lewis]. Take five! Ready three [play-by-play camera]. Take three. Nice shot, Pat!"

As the Giants lined up over the ball, Wolff wanted attention paid to wide receiver Plaxico Burress, a likely target. "Cover 17! Iso 17!"

Fish: "Where's 17?"

Wolff: "Far-side receiver."

Fish: "Far receiver on camera two!"

But the pass wasn't to Burress, it was to tight end Kevin Boss, who caught it in the end zone. From outside the trailer came the roar of jubilant Giants fans. Inside, the touchdown ignited a frenzy as well. Fish machine-gunned a mosaic of the scene, leaning toward his array of monitors as the cameras swung violently, finding one telling visual after another, his high-pitched voice squeaking at the upper reaches of its register:

"Ready five [close-up of Manning jumping for joy]. Take five! Ready two [close-up of Boss, still carrying the ball, mobbed by joyful teammates in the end zone]. Take two! Ready three [rejoicing New York fans]. Take three! Ready four [beaten Bengals strong safety Chinedum Ndukwe trotting off the field]. Take four! Ready eight [Marvin Lewis looking forlornly up at the scoreboard]. Take eight! Ready 12 [a pan of cheering Giants fans in the upper deck]. Take 12! Ready two [another close-up of Boss]. Take two! Ready

five [a close-up of Manning leaving the field]. Take five! Ready eight [close-up of the shell-shocked Chad Johnson]. Take eight! Ready three [another crowd shot]. Take three! Ready two [a close-up of Boss, reaching the sidelines, still carrying his touchdown catch]. Take two! Ready 12 [Bengals huddling on the field before the extra point]. Take 12! Ready six [close-up of Manning accepting a pat on the helmet from Gilbride]. Take six! Ready four [close-up of Lewis, shaking his head with disgust]. Take four! Ready five [more high fives for Manning on the sidelines]. Take five! Break! Extra point! Ready four [a high shot in the end zone behind the goalposts as the Giants line up to kick]."

Wolff: "Fish, I'm going X, Y, Silver, Moe!"—the lineup of upcoming replay shots of the touchdown. (The replay machines are given letters, to differentiate them from the numbered cameras.)

Fish: "Ready two [Boss on one knee on the sidelines, having been mildly shaken up on his touchdown play, trainers crowded around him]. Take two! Ready four, aaaand take four!" The extra point was booted.

Wolff: "Are you listening?"

Fish: "Yes! X, Y, Silver, Moe!"

Wolff: "I'll talk you through it."

Fish: "Ready two [another shot of Boss on the sideline]. Take two! Ready X. Aaaaand take X! Here it is!"

The replays of the touchdown followed, each from a different angle, the last an isolated shot from an end-zone camera showing Manning celebrating after the play. Then it was time for another blizzard of calls from Fish.

THIS FRENZIED MOVEMENT after the Giants touchdown seemed to mark the conclusion of the symphony, a game-ending flourish. But the game was far from over. "I want to see Carson Palmer's career comebacks!" Wolff shouted to his graphics technicians, who summoned up a graphic showing that the Bengals QB had an impressive record of bringing his team back from late-game deficits. And sure enough, the scrappy Bengals mounted a last-second drive and kicked a tying field goal in the closing seconds, forcing the game into overtime, in which the Giants marched into field-goal range and won it, finally, 23-20, with a well-directed 22-yard boot.

By the end, Fish was hoarse. A police escort waited to whisk him and the CBS crew to the airport ahead of the thousands of fans exiting the stadium. On the plane home, he would review a hastily assembled DVD of the broadcast, which he—unlike his millions of viewers—would be seeing for the first time. Like any other artist, when he watches the program, he mostly sees the things he might have done better.

When I last saw Fish, he was leaving the trailer, getting ready to figure out where he and his crew would be going next week. But I already knew the answer. Whether his windowless production trailer was in the parking lot outside Lambeau Field or Dolphin Stadium, he would be in the same place he is every week of the season for millions of football fans all across America: behind the curtain, lodged deep inside our brains. ■

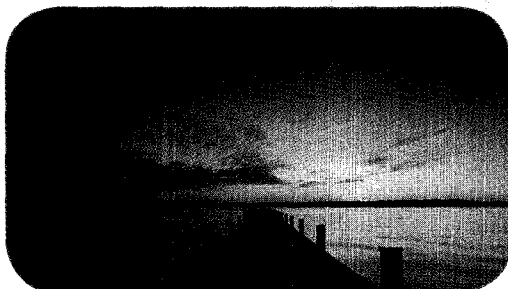
Mark Bowden is an Atlantic national correspondent.

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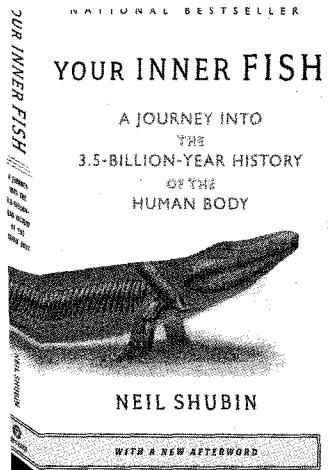
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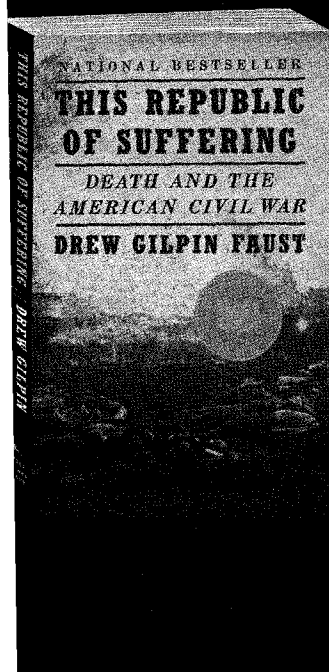
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EDITOR'S CHOICE

Globaloney

A NEW REPORT FROM THE COUNTRY'S TOP INTELLIGENCE OFFICE PREDICTS A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN AMERICA'S FOREIGN POLICY—BUT NOT THE CHANGE BARACK OBAMA HAS PROMISED.

By Benjamin Schwarz

CHANGE" HAS BEEN President-elect Barack Obama's mantra, and for many of his supporters, the most important change his administration promises is a more restrained, less arrogant foreign policy, a global posture that avoids the costs and dangers inherent in playing the world's policeman. They're dismayed by the presumptuous and anachronistic attitudes behind the declaration

that the president of the United States is the "leader of the free world." They're exasperated with the messianic invocation of "America's larger purpose in the world," with the smug notion that this country is "called to provide visionary leadership" in "bat-tling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good." They discern the dangers of declaring with righteous omniscience that America "has a direct national security interest" in seeing its economic and political beliefs take hold in foreign lands. They're annoyed with

the historical myopia that results in an unironic reference to American military "operations to win hearts and minds." In the claim that "the security of the American people is inextricably linked to the security of all people," they hear echoes of the universalist logic that led to the disaster in Vietnam and see a sweeping foreign policy that the rest of the world finds at best meddlesome and at worst menacingly imperialist.

These lofty but potentially dangerous sentiments are entirely consistent with George W. Bush's assertion in his

THOMAS FUCHS

second Inaugural Address that “the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands”—an assertion his critics at home and abroad rightly judged as ... lofty and potentially dangerous. But the pronouncements quoted above—all of them—are in fact from Barack Obama’s two major foreign-policy statements, both made in 2007.

This isn’t to charge the president-elect with hypocrisy (he has consistently enunciated these views, which could be fairly described as standard liberal internationalist, even if some of his enthusiasts haven’t been particularly alert to them) but to show that the beliefs underlying America’s global role since the end of the Second World War have been remarkably consistent, embraced by both Democratic and Republican administrations. And they lead inevitably to America’s playing the “imperial” role so many of Obama’s supporters decry.

To define, as Obama does, conflict, misrule, nondemocratic states, and non-capitalist economies as threats in themselves; to assert (as did Anthony Lake, Obama’s senior and probably closest foreign-policy adviser, when he served as national-security adviser in the Clinton administration) that in order to maintain its safety, America must enlarge the “world’s free community of market democracies” and counter the “aggression ... of states hostile to democracy and markets”; to avow, as did President Clinton in 1993, that the security of the United States demands that its foreign policy “focus on relations within nations, on a nation’s form of governance, on its economic structure”—to embrace all this is to expand lavishly, really to warp, any conventional conception of security and of the national interest. It is to adopt a posture approximating paranoia in an often illiberal and chaotic world.

Certainly, the fundamental “change” Obama glibly promised is warranted, as a report issued by the National Intelligence Council in November, “Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World” (from the U.S. Government Printing Office, and available online at www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_2025_project.html), makes clear. Every four years, the NIC—the analysis arm of the Office

of the Director of National Intelligence, charged with long-term planning—produces a review of global military, economic, political, and demographic trends. In the past, the result, which forecast more or less more of the same, has been pretty anodyne. But the conclusions here, though somewhat hedged, are shocking. They mean that America will indeed be forced to radically change its foreign policies—and not in the way Obama has promised.

OBAMA’S FORMULA THAT American security can’t be separated from the security of people anywhere and everywhere—a proposition identical to Dean Rusk’s reasoning during the Vietnam War that America “can be secure only to the extent that our total environment is secure”—is the antithesis of statecraft, which requires discriminating on the basis of power, interest, and circumstance. It can only multiply security commitments. Rather than accepting conflict between states and among peoples as a permanent feature of the international environment, Obama yokes American safety to the salvation of that environment—which is, to borrow a term his devotees have rightly used to criticize his predecessor’s foreign-policy projects, a truly messianic task.

The idea that America will be safe only when the rest of the world is converted to American ideals breeds a Manichean view of world politics and inevitably creates a barrier to diplomacy. As the political scientist Hans Morgenthau recognized, when states claim that their ideals are universal,

compromise, the virtue of the old diplomacy, becomes the treason of the new; for the mutual accommodation of conflicting claims ... amounts to surrender when the moral standards are themselves the stakes of the conflict.

With missionary muscularity, Obama says that the United States “shouldn’t shy away from pushing for more democracy ... in Russia,” proposing an intrusion hardly conducive to smooth relations between two sovereign great powers. (Obama’s future UN ambassador, Susan Rice, was asked if Russians would appreciate Washington’s dictating

to them the internal arrangements it finds acceptable—after all, how would Americans react if Russia’s president “pushed” for authoritarianism here? She replied, with a hint of the high-handedness Obama’s supporters found dismaying in the previous administration’s foreign-policy utterances, “No, they would not like it. But that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t be doing it.”) But Obama also asserts, correctly—and in the very next sentence—that America “must work with Russia” to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. He fails to apprehend how the pursuit of his first imperative stymies the second.

In his emphatic declarations—declarations all but identical to those of every post-Cold War administration—Obama has made clear that he will not “cede our claim of leadership in world affairs,” meaning he is unwilling to fundamentally refashion America’s foreign policy. Far from a vague shibboleth, “leadership” (or, more precisely, hegemony—American statesmen and policy planners always use the euphemism) in fact connotes a complex global role and a set of specific strategies. Predating and quite apart from the necessary costs and measures involved in countering the threat al-Qaeda poses, American strategy has been based on the perceived imperative to impose military protectorates over Europe and East Asia. By enmeshing the states in these regions in security alliances that it dominates and obviating their need

Readers looking for genuine “change” in American foreign policy should consult the following books, some out of print, all out of fashion:

George F. Kennan’s *Around the Cragged Hill*; Ronald Steel’s characteristically sharp and elegant *Temptations of a Superpower*; E. H. Carr’s *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, the sardonic antidote to Wilsonianism; William Appleman Williams’s *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*; Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America*; Robert A. Packenham’s *Liberal America and the Third World*; and Christopher Layne’s *The Peace of Illusions*, the most penetrating, intellectually daring work I’ve read on post-Cold War foreign policy.

to develop air and naval forces with global reach (ensuring, for instance, the safe flow of oil from the Persian Gulf), Washington has prevented potential great powers from pursuing autonomous and, so the thinking goes, possibly destabilizing policies.

Of course, maintaining what the Clinton-era Pentagon called "full-spectrum dominance" over allies and potential enemies means that America must spend more on its military than do virtually all other countries combined (despite the economic catastrophe we're now facing, Obama's spokesmen have made clear that he won't reduce defense spending). It also entails expanded and risky defense commitments. The enlargement of NATO—a policy the Clinton administration initiated, the Bush administration pursued, and Obama endorses—was intended to bolster America's position in post-Cold War Europe. (Advocates of the policy argued that the alliance, the essential vehicle for U.S. "leadership" in Europe, would go "out of business" if it didn't go "out of area.") But by extending its

military and nuclear umbrella over an unstable region historically outside its strategic orbit, America has taken on its most ambitious and far-reaching security obligations since the late 1940s, thereby committing what George Kennan called "a strategic blunder of potentially epic proportions." Pushing the U.S.-led alliance into regions very much in Russia's sphere of influence has understandably antagonized a great power whose cooperation the Obama administration will need if it is to resolve a range of issues—nuclear proliferation, relations with Iran, terrorism, global warming—that it has placed at the top of its international agenda.

American officials like to describe Washington's leadership as "benign." It might not appear so to others. Long before the Iraq War, Russia and China (as well as some of our "partners") feared the strategic imbalance in America's favor. In the days when Madeleine Albright was swaggeringly declaring America "the indispensable nation ... We stand tall and hence see farther," much of the rest of the world

shared the sentiments of an anonymous British diplomat who spoke of the Clinton administration in the same terms critics would later use to describe the George W. Bush administration:

One reads about the world's desire for American leadership only in the United States. Everywhere else one reads about American arrogance and unilateralism.

Back then, a few American foreign-policy analysts argued (in these pages and elsewhere) that America's strategy was not only risky but Sisyphean. They explained that other states would coalesce against American hegemony and that American leadership would be undermined by its own success. The Pentagon has asserted that American preponderance created and sustained the foundations for "a market-oriented zone of peace and prosperity encompassing two-thirds of the world economy." But the problem with a giant zone of peace and prosperity is that it bites the hegemon that feeds it: by augmenting the wealth and power of multiple

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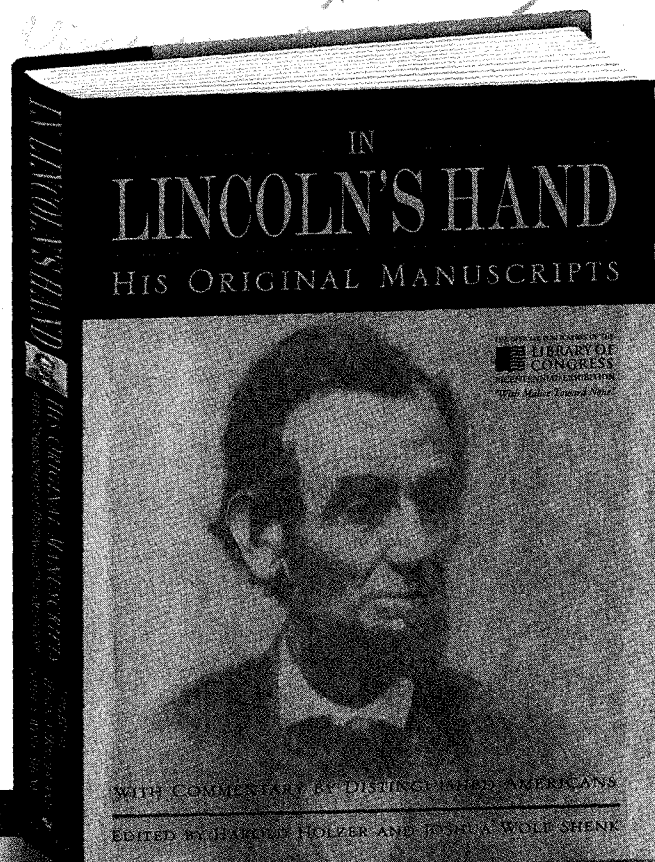
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states, the United States spurs the relative decline of its own power even as it contributes to the absolute growth of its own (and the world's) economy. Instead of pursuing "leadership," these analysts argued, the U.S. would do better to accept and in fact encourage the emergence of a multipolar system of truly independent great powers, which would take care of their own and their regions' security. Such arguments were barely considered. Triumphalists—Democratic and Republican, left-wing and right—believed that international politics could in effect be transcended, and that American leadership, like the ever-rising Dow, could be sustained indefinitely.

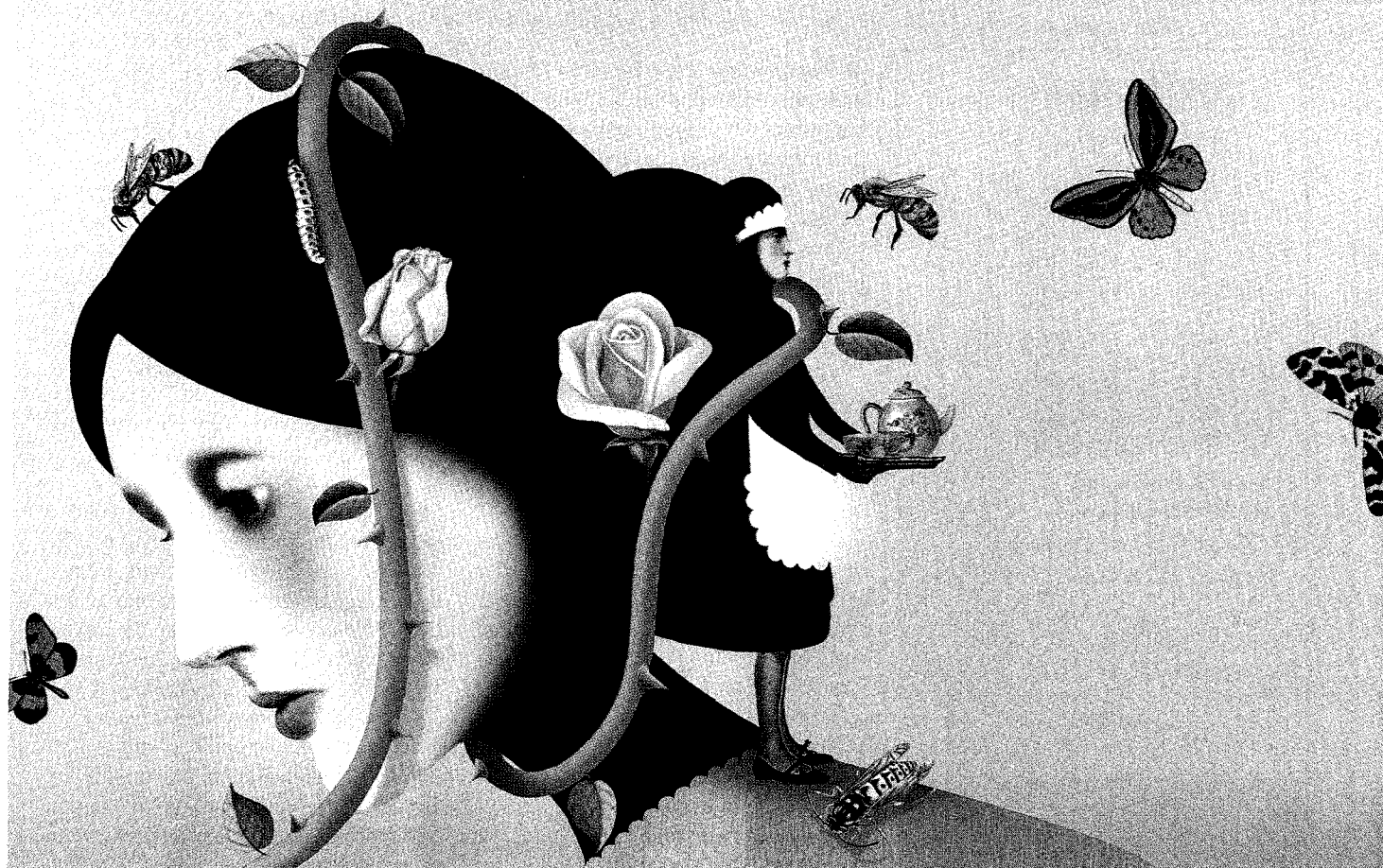
"Global Trends 2025" should shake Obama's confidence in the wisdom of embracing a hegemonic foreign policy. Owing largely to the unanticipated quickening of the processes described above (which the NIC characterizes as "the unprecedented shift in relative wealth and economic power roughly from West to East"), the report concludes, in the words of the NIC chairman, Thomasingar, that over the next 16 years,

American dominance will be much diminished ... The overwhelming dominance that the United States has enjoyed in the international system ... is eroding and will erode at an accelerating pace ...

A multipolar world—a world of autonomous great powers that American global strategy has sought to avert for 60 years—will inevitably emerge.

If the NIC is correct, this president, elected on a promise of change, will be presiding over the country as it begins to come to terms with the most significant transformation in international politics since the Second World War (and that includes the Cold War). Among the other momentous tasks that confront him, he must help create a new American stance toward the world. Maybe now isn't the time to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. And why insist that the United States cling to a prerogative that history is about to snatch away? ■

Benjamin Schwarz is The Atlantic's literary editor and national editor.



Imperfect Union

A BRILLIANT NEW BOOK PROBES THE INTIMATE, UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE WOMAN WHO CARED FOR HER.

By Mona Simpson

IF I WERE reading this," a 1929 entry in Virginia Woolf's diary records,

if it were a book that came my way, I think I should seize with greed on the portrait of Nelly, and make a story—perhaps make the whole story revolve around ... her character—our efforts to get rid of her—our reconciliations.

"Nelly" is Nellie Boxall, Woolf's cook for 18 years.

"By rights," Woolf wrote, Lottie—the parlormaid—"should have a whole chapter to herself." But as we know, Woolf's great servant novel doesn't exist. The literary historian Alison Light suggests, in her penetrating, nuanced

book *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury*, that though she tried, Woolf never could write about poor people. Perhaps not least, Light posits, because she was wary of the "glamour" of slumming. Woolf criticized work by Edith Sichel, a Victorian "poor peopler," because her accounts avoided the mention of "copulation or w.c.s."

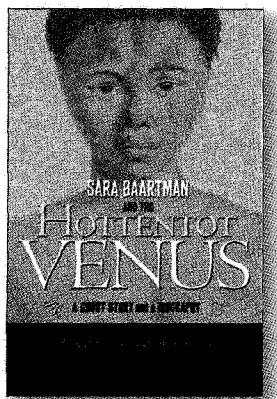
Woolf herself stinted on copulation, and I don't remember even one WC in her work. Having grown up in a house with seven servants who lived in what Woolf referred to as "dark insanitary places" in the basement or the attic, the writer understood that she knew very little about the poor. But she *did* write about

her servants in her letters and diaries. For a time, Virginia and her sister, Vanessa Bell, wrote to each other "every day about their servants' doings."

Why didn't those doings make it into her fiction?

LIGHT TELLS US two resonant facts in her preface. Her own grandmother had been a live-in servant, after she'd been put in a workhouse following her parents' death. She'd said she was "treated like dirt" by other women; at 16 her hair turned white following a breakdown. Light also tells us that her own feelings about the material of this book changed after she cared for her husband before his death.





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"It was my first experience of looking after someone else's every need since I was not a mother." I assume this to mean that caregiving is not always an experience of degradation and that dependency, even in its extremes, can offer opportunities for great acts of tenderness. Light tells us:

I wanted to write this book to get to the bottom of some of those feelings which I associated with the "class consciousness" I had grown up with ... the messy, painful, intimate, damaging feelings of inferiority, envy, deference and belligerence.

While she attempts to chronicle the unrecorded lives of servants, another subterranean movement follows Light's developing understanding of the nature of dependency, from her first position—granddaughter of a woman who was "treated like dirt"—to her role as the wife who nursed her dying husband. Light had hoped to present the lives of servants in a way that would "upstage those of their employers," but that didn't turn out to be possible, because the servants' versions of their own stories don't exist. In her research, she encountered tantalizing close calls. A Bloomsbury governess left a half-written novel about her time with the Bells (Vanessa found the writings "bitter"), but the document didn't survive. Unable to tell the story in the servants' own words, Light gleans their lives through the records left by those they worked for. "Servants may leave only vestigial traces in the official histories of the past," Light writes, "but they have always loomed large in the imagination of their employers."

Well, in the case of Woolf's mother, not really. Julia Stephen moved through her home with serene efficiency, supervising servants who, by all accounts, loved her. One doesn't feel that the servants *loomed large* in her imagination. She was at peace with the idea of *having* them. Woolf's relationship with servants—her caregivers—was always more central and thus more fraught. Woolf attempted suicide for the first time after her father's death, when she was 22, and for the first years of her marriage, she was in a state of

breakdown or recovery. Symptoms that plagued her early life—headaches, sleeplessness, depression, anxiety, guilt, and an aversion to food—returned. (Several books have been written about her anorexia.) Her inability to eat if she was agitated made food and the person who prepared it for her a matter of paramount importance. Vanessa told the newlywed Leonard "how much better Virginia ate when she was helped," and the sisters' childhood cook, Sophie Farrell, was summoned back for a short stay.

ALTHOUGH LIGHT'S BOOK follows the lives of several Bloomsbury servants and traces the changing supply and demand for domestic service from the Victorian age to the postwar period, the central story chronicles Virginia Woolf's turbulent relationship with Nellie Boxall. Boxall came as a live-in servant in 1916. Light imagines that Woolf must have appeared a "fragile woman" 10 years her senior, "in an old dressing-gown propped up on the sofa." Like her new employer, Boxall had lost her mother at a young age (she began working at 14, just two years after her mother's death) and also suffered from "nerves."

Neither Virginia nor her sister knew how to cook. As different as the talented daughters were from their Victorian mother, they too found themselves dependent on servants, but much less happily so. And, while Vanessa could somehow work amid the clutter of bohemian family life, Virginia needed her comforts—particularly carefully prepared food—in order to write. The Woolf household "revolved around the routines which made it possible for her to write," Light tells us: "regular meals, a rest after lunch, not too many visitors, no late nights."

Boxall lived with the Woolfs for 18 years; for more than half that time, she was the only servant in the house. Reading their saga, one has the sense of a marriage. As might be expected with two such similar people, it was a *ride* with sulks, recriminations, weeping, supplication—and pages of analysis in Virginia's diaries, where the fights dramatized their closeness.

MRS. WOOLF AND THE SERVANTS
By Alison Light
BLOOMSBURY

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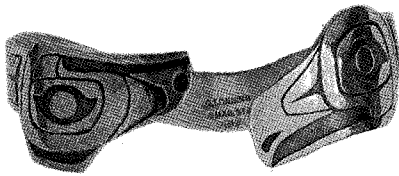
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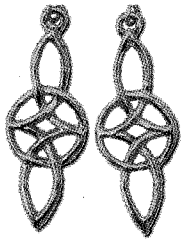


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This is ... one of those stupendous moments—one of those painful, ridiculous, agitating moments which make one half sick ... I'm excited too; & feel free & then sordid; & unsettled; & so on—I've told Nelly to go; after a series of scenes ... And in the midst of the usual anger, I looked into her little shifting greedy eyes, & saw nothing but malice & spite there ... *she doesn't care for me* [italics mine].

While servants may have lingered somewhere in Woolf's mother's imagination or at least on her to-do lists, it's hard to imagine Julia Stephen, or her incarnations as Mrs. Ramsay or Mrs. Dalloway, so plaintively wanting to be liked by a just-fired cook.

After the "series of scenes," Nellie bicycled four miles to get cream for the Woolfs' supper; the two fought when Nellie would not make marmalade. Nellie prepared Virginia's bath, and carried food and milk to her on a tray. For Virginia's 36th birthday, she hand-knit red socks, which the writer apparently enjoyed wearing in the mornings. Nellie danced the foxtrot listening to the gramophone. Virginia had her take lessons with the celebrity chef Marcel Boulestin (many of their rapprochements involved food). In 1924, Nellie gave notice "for the 165th time." She would work for the Woolfs another 10 years.

Like most intense relationships, Woolf's with Nellie mingled anger and kindness, forgiveness and grievance. The Woolfs "lent" Nellie to Vanessa. When Nellie made jam from seven pounds of hand-picked blackberries (a reversal from her former refusal to make marmalade), Woolf took it as "her way of thanking me for having Lottie—after all, she has no other. And one tends to forget it." In her diary, Woolf described Nellie as "almost insufferably mean, selfish & spiteful ... a human mind wriggling undressed." But as a postscript to a letter to Leonard, she scrawled, "Love to Nelly." She named a kitten Boxall after Nellie—"to ingratiate her."

Most of the complaints on Nellie's part seemed to be about having too much work. She angled for another helper. On Virginia's side of their eternal fight was an avalanche of hurt feelings. What is this, if not the story of a durable bond

between people who form an imperfect fit? Or is it the story of the ways one woman uses another, because she can? The distinction plagues Light and generates the conflicted momentum of her book. The Woolfs obsess about "the question of Nelly." Light endlessly worries the problem of Virginia Woolf, who left behind beautiful work but required a servant's help to stay sane enough to do that work.

Woolf achieved financial success with the publication of *Orlando* in 1928. But as their standard of living rose, the Woolfs began to wonder whether they needed to keep Nellie.

I am sordidly debating within myself ... the perennial question ... It is an absurdity how much time L. & I have wasted in talking about servants.

Woolf thought she wanted a "daily," a "liver out" who would treat her "as an employer, not friend." In the summer of 1929, Woolf attempted to cook the dinners. She wrote to Vita Sackville-West that she was "free forever of cooks. I cooked veal cutlets and cake today. I assure you it is better than writing these idiotic books."

As Light observes, Woolf was happy to cook, but apparently not to clean.

On a rare occasion when Virginia found herself doing the dishes, she was amazed at the effort: "I've been washing up lunch—how servants preserve either sanity or sobriety if that is nine 10ths of their lives—greasy ham—God knows."

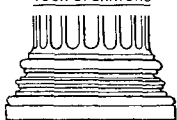
In 1929, after Woolf published *A Room of One's Own*, during another of their "scenes," Nellie asked Woolf to leave her room. "Sick and shivery" (as Light imagines the nervous writer), Virginia decided to fire her the next day, but instead the Woolfs compromised again, hiring a char to do more of the rough work (cleaning lavatories).

Light's attempt to understand the contagious sense of shame surrounding service drives her emphasis on sloppers, chamber pots, and the work involved in cleaning up human excrement before the installation of modern plumbing. According to Light, Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, considered American plumbing extravagant and mildly corrupting (one wonders *whom*



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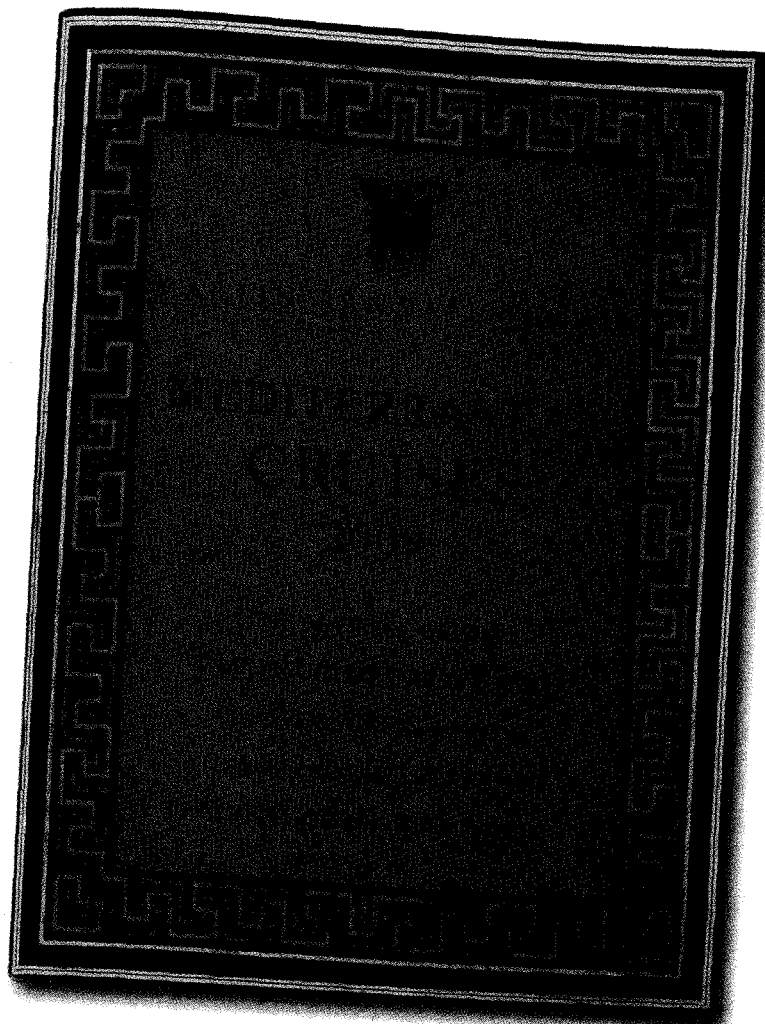
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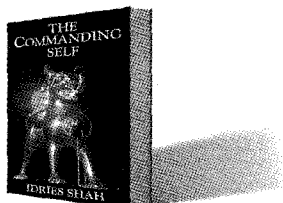
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he thought would be corrupted! The servants?) and preferred to hire a slopper to empty chamber pots into the water closet and clean the basins. This resistance to modern plumbing turned out to be inherited. Shortly before the Woolfs' marriage, after weighing the options, Virginia decided to use earth-closets at their country house—which would be cleaned out by an elderly worker—rather than install a drain for a WC.

This must have been exceedingly frustrating for the servants, to whom the Stephens and the Woolfs seemed rich. Why wouldn't these people pay for the new, sanitary plumbing? But the Woolfs weren't rich during most of the time Nellie worked for them. Their refusals to hire the helper she wanted no doubt had to do with money. (The persistent problem of the artistic upper-middle class: rich in their servants' eyes, they are nonetheless stretching to make ends meet.)

In 1930, when Nellie got sick, Woolf brought her to the hospital and, as Light relates, "what with doctors, planning and cooking dinner," she lost two weeks of writing. (Leonard's work went on uninterrupted.) When Nellie came home, she was met with a letter of dismissal claiming that relations between the two women had changed since "the famous scene last November" (when Nellie asserted the idea that, in Woolf's house, she had a room of her own—by demanding Woolf leave it). Woolf recorded parts of their hours-long talk in her diary.

Still I can't understand why you won't have me back ...

But Nelly, you gave me notice 10 times in the past 6 years—& more ...

But I always took it back.

Yes, but that sort of thing gets on the nerves.

Oh ma'am I never meant to tire you—don't go on talking now if it tires you—but you wouldn't give me any help. Now Grace ... has all the

help she wants—Well, I says, this is long service.

But then Nelly you forgot that when you were with us.

But then for 3 years I've been ill. And I shall never like any mistress as much as I like you.

Nellie would continue working for the Woolfs for another three years. One might wonder if the main reason she stayed really was, as she said, a liking for her mistress. In fact, by the standards of her time, Nellie's job was a good one, as Light observes. She wore no uniform. (In Clive Bell's home, the maids served

dinner in black alpaca frocks and white caps and aprons well into the 1930s.) Nellie called Virginia "Mrs. Woolf," not "Ma'am." No members of the household bothered to dress for dinner, and the meal was not "served." No table linens had to be ironed. Once, Nellie and her mistress even worked together to empty the tubs when the pipes froze.

Finally, in 1934, after yet another "great Nelly row," Woolf decided it

really was time to fire the servant. She was so distressed by her decision that she had to stop working on her novel. Then, after "the most disagreeable six weeks of my life," she did it, feeling "executioner & the executed in one." In one of the last glimpses we have of Nellie in the diary, she is standing "by the drawing-room door in the full light, white & pink, with her funny rather foolish mulish face."

She would not accept a check from Virginia, saying, "But you don't owe me anything."

The last sentence Virginia ever wrote about Nellie appeared in her diary a few months later. "After eighteen years I at last got rid of an affectionate domestic tyrant." She makes no further reference to Nellie (or "Nelly," as Woolf misspelled her name—for almost two decades) in her diary or letters. After their 18 years of living together, that silence, more than any of the flashes of hatred, shocks.

It was a ride with sulks, recriminations, weeping, supplication—and pages of analysis in Woolf's diaries, which testify to the closeness of the warring parties.

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BUT NELLIE THRIVED. She found a job with Charles Laughton and Elsa Lanchester, then Britain's best-known stage couple, just returned from Hollywood. The movie stars were significantly richer than the literary Woolfs, and Happy Powley, the maid who worked alongside Nellie there, remembered "Dietrich bringing out the dirty plates to a cupboard on the landing."

And Nellie had her own moment of fame: she was featured in an advertisement for a porcelain-enameled gas cooker, under the heading "Mr. and Mrs. Charles Laughton's Cook Tells You How to Roast Beef to Perfection."

When the Laughtons went to the United States, in 1939, they asked her along, but she returned to Surrey, where she'd grown up, and lived again with Lottie. Nellie worked as cook in a hospital canteen during World War II. Lottie worked in the local laundry. In the 1950s, Nellie bought a house; the Laughtons had given her furniture. "The girl from the family of 10 got her own house," Light tells us. Nellie was "the first to have an extension built, and a bathroom and indoor toilet put in, the first to have a television ... Lottie did all the cleaning; Nellie, the cooking."

Nellie died in 1965, without a will. (Although Lottie owned nothing, the Boxall family allowed Nellie's longtime friend to remain. But without Nellie, Light tells us, Lottie fell apart and moved to a public home that had once been a workhouse.) By all outward signs, Nellie was able to shake off her history of cleaning Virginia Woolf's chamber pots. Even on her own, she never cleaned house again.

As we all know, Virginia fared less well.

After they fired Nellie, the Woolfs mainly hired "livers out." Their income increased throughout the '30s, profits from *Flush* bought a "new pond, regouted the old one, and paved the front garden." The couple constructed a summer studio for Virginia. New fireplaces were added, and a dormered room under the roof became a library.

Despite all this optimistic renovation, the cottages where Leonard's gardener and their "liver out" lived, each with spouses and children, remained

damp, "without hot water, bathrooms, or water-closets." For four adults and five children, they had only an outside privy until after the Second World War.

On the morning of the day she died, Woolf dusted the house with her "liver out," who treated her more like "an employer" than Nellie ever had. One wonders, as one wonders after every suicide, whether at that last moment, an intimacy, even an ambivalent intimacy, could have saved her.

Virginia and Leonard frequently used the word *housemaid* as an insult. "What a housemaid[']s mind he has," Woolf said of Edward Sackville-West, the cousin of her lover, Vita Sackville-West. She found the noise of servants in the house agitating, with their "talk talk talk." She noted the bad teeth of the poor. Yet, the worst passage of class ugliness is this sober opinion, drenched with pity:

The poor have no ... manner or self-control to protect themselves with; we have a monopoly of all the generous feelings.

But though Woolf had described Nellie as a "mongrel," a "poor drudge," and a "domestic tyrant," when the BBC interviewed Boxall in 1956, she recalled making ice cream with chocolate sauce and crème brûlée. "All was harmony in the kitchen (except that Mrs. Woolf, being a lady, always used up all the saucepans when she tried to cook)." Nellie said Woolf was "always very nice" to her relatives. And "I had to go to hospital and she was very kind. She came to see me in the ward carrying a huge pineapple.

"I was sorry to leave, but I wasn't out of a job for long," Nellie said.

Woolf's most productive years, Light observes, coincided with the years when Nellie Boxall was the writer's "liver in": She wrote her great novels—*Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*. She published myriad reviews and essays, including *A Room of One's Own* and the literary criticism that she collected in *The Common Reader*. "She became wealthy for the first time in her life; she began her love affair with Sackville-West; her marriage to Leonard still delighted and invigorated her," Light avers.

The idea of independence was central to this life ... But these were also years when ... it was Nellie who drew the curtains, brought the lemonade and the trays, who tempted Virginia's appetite with invalid foods, and presumably emptied the chamber-pot which continued to reside under the bed.

Light's original ambition—to discover the inner lives of women like her grandmother—was destined to fail, because the Nellies of the world, including her immigrant descendants in America, don't write memoirs. They're too busy working their way out of poverty into the middle class. Their children and grandchildren—like Light, like most of us—will, because of our gratitude and guilt, forever want to know how they felt. The best window yet is fiction—think of Stendhal's Julien Sorel's resentment of and infatuation for his betters, think of Flaubert's *A Simple Heart*, think of the German tutor in *War and Peace* who records every dish of the banquet to describe in his letter home.

Although writing about characters of another class is exceedingly hard (as difficult as crossing boundaries of gender and race), that doesn't explain why Woolf didn't write a book about servants—when the subject forms a leitmotif in her journals and letters. A clue may be found in one instance when she did manage to write about Nellie outside her diaries and letters.

In a famous passage Light cites, Woolf flatly asserted, "On or about December, 1910, human character changed." The change could be observed, she argued, "in the character of one's cook ... The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths," but the "Georgian cook" was "a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing-room, now to borrow the *Daily Herald*, now to ask advice about a hat."

One can imagine the pleasure Woolf took in writing those lines (she once described the diversions she forfeited for her writing: "I've shirked two parties, and another Frenchman, and buying a hat"), and no doubt scenes like the one above in the drawing room did transpire between the two women; yet the happy frivolity of exchanging millinery opinions hardly characterizes Nellie's true position in the Woolf house. Nellie was an employee, taking

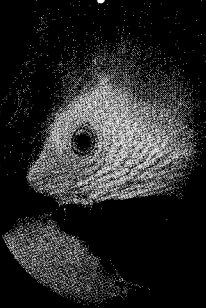
orders and emptying chamber pots. Part of the difficulty of the job must have been the emotional component that required her to act the part of an equal—a daughter or a friend—while bringing Woolf food on a tray and washing her chemises.

Perhaps Woolf encountered a blind spot writing about the servants because she was too invested in believing a version of her own life, in which the household rhythm and taste and temper she required was best not only for her and for the work she hoped would become literature, but also for the person who made that rhythm and temper (and those great meals). What Nellie gave Woolf, what Vera (who typed her husband's manuscripts and sat in on his Cornell lectures, in addition to doing most of what Nellie did) gave Nabokov, what numberless wives have given great men and what artist's colonies have given artists since the turn of the 19th century is routine maternal care. That elixir allows artists—famously prone to "nerves"—to work. But unlike Nabokov and the young composer who is a guest at Yaddo, Woolf had to pay Nellie. And therein lies the problem. That seemed to her a little bit sordid. None of us wants to pay for love.

Orwell, observing the coal miners, presented a picture very different from that of Woolf working alongside Nellie or the char. Orwell's relation to coal production remained abstract, whereas Woolf would see her own dinner cooked, her underwear scrubbed, and her chamber pot from the night before emptied and washed. Domestic work has always put the people doing the work and the ones benefiting from it in a deeply intimate and unequal relationship. Woolf needed to hire a woman in order to write. None of us, least of all a woman given to inward examination, wishes to think that the emotional conditions necessary for her to do the work she loves involve some form of oppression. These messy feelings of guilt and dependence may have been Woolf's obstacle in depicting Nellie. Light's book proves one thing that could not have been the problem: it wasn't that Woolf didn't love her enough. ■

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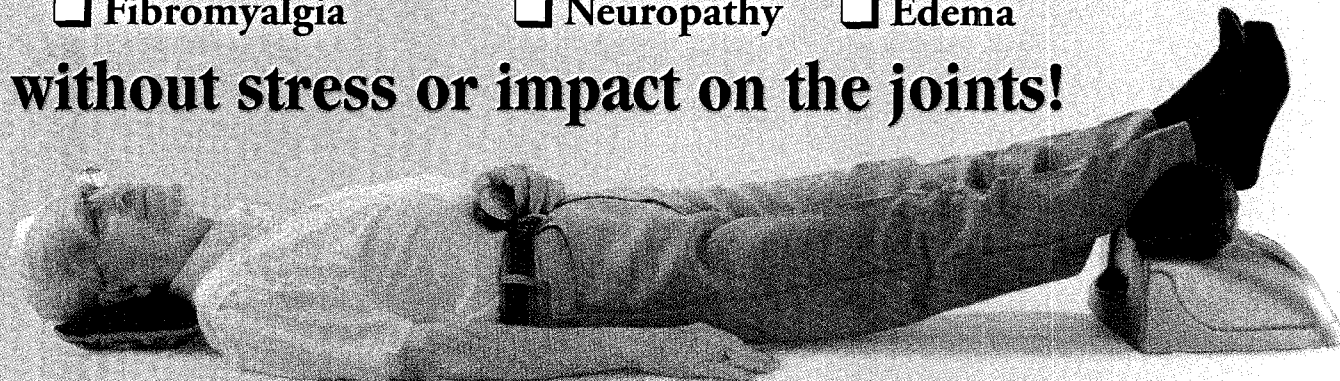
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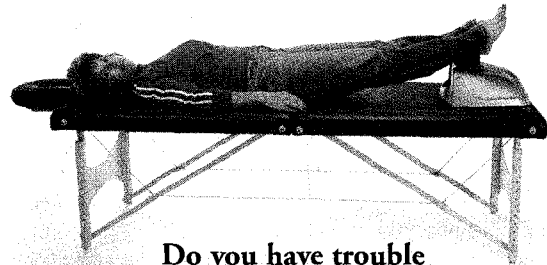
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I had been spending my days just waiting when I saw your ad in Guideposts for the Exerciser 2000 Elite™. I had edema of my left foot and leg, two bad falls and a fear of falling which made me inactive. I'm 97 years old. Could it really help me? My daughter encouraged me to try it. I did. It's working! I feel alive again and have a new zest for life, thanks to you. —Grace R.
P.S. My daughter loves it too!

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Mercy!

TONI MORRISON'S NEW HISTORICAL NOVEL IS A MONOTONOUS SERIES OF FLASHBACKS, LARDED WITH ANACHRONISMS.

By B. R. Myers

SOME PEOPLE COMPLAIN that 19th-century fiction takes too long to get going. But does it really? Once the hero's pedigree is out of the way, the Victorian novel moves resolutely forward. The contemporary narrative, on the other hand, offers a quick thrill up front that readers must pay off, in a kind of installment plan, by enduring one flashback after another.

Take Toni Morrison's new novel, *A Mercy*. Set in the American colonies in the 1680s, it tells of an Anglo-Dutch trader who gathers around him no fewer than four traumatized girls. First he buys Lina, a Native American survivor of a smallpox epidemic, to help manage his household. Then, after negotiating another "sale," he marries a 16-year-old English girl whose parents always treated her with "glazed indifference." Then he takes in a young orphan called Sorrow. Finally he accepts, as payment for a debt, a slave girl called Florens. There is too much common

ground among these characters for the reader to have an easy time keeping them apart. A little conflict might have helped, but Morrison will not even let them compete for a visiting blacksmith—a free black man and, it would seem, the only attractive male in the New World. Perhaps this tendency to idealize the exploited is part of our literary tradition as a whole. Where the European writer condemns poverty for bringing out the worst in people, the American condemns it for oppressing such fine and decent folk; compare *Germinal*, say, with *The Grapes of Wrath*. Morrison, too, is so

A MERCY

By Toni Morrison
KNOPF

busy showcasing her characters' nobility that we get little sense of what hardship can really do to the human spirit. One of the girls "wears bright blue beads and dances in secret at first light when the moon is small": there's too much of that sort of thing.

A short novel at only 167 pages (the title is apt), *A Mercy* might still have held the reader's attention had it ignored the contemporary taboo

against straightforward, sequential storytelling. But this is in effect a series of backstories, some told in the narrator's affected voice, some in the characters' scatty idiom, but all moving at the same uninvolved expository trot. Back and forth the book goes over the same period, summing up this life, then that, with more crude sarcasm brought to bear on colonial society—"Lina ... let herself be purified by these worthies," etc.—than sincere effort to understand it. Months, years, and entire character transformations are dispatched in a few enumerative sentences.

Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe [sic] medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world.

How shallow and vague that is; how glibly it breezes through the life of the mind. *A Mercy* is eked out with a few set pieces, but even they rush us through; the book never seems to settle into narrative "real time."

For all its cheerlessness, the novel is anything but grittily realistic. Some scenes, such as one in which a character gets out of her bath "aslide with wintergreen," evince an effort to make even these miserable lives picturesque. But Morrison's failure to evoke the period is more the fault of her all-too-contemporary prose style: "1682 and Virginia was still a mess." No one likes an archaizer, apart from a million Cormac McCarthy fans, but a novelist writing of the 17th century should at least avoid language that is jarringly inconsistent or out of place. Reminiscing, the slaves vacillate between would-be-poetic English and an equally improbable sort of Hollywood Injun: "Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they were told to break we in." Anachronisms abound, from New Age lingo like "She gives off a bad feeling" to the dialect of the postbellum South: "her borning young." We are even told that our Anglo-Dutch trader had "gone head to head with rich gentry." What, and not drunk their milk shake? ■

B. R. Myers is an Atlantic contributing editor and the author of *A Reader's Manifesto* (2002).

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Cool Cat

OUR NEW PRESIDENT HAS A FELINE'S LEGENDARY NIMBLENESS AND LUCK—
BUT THERE ARE DOWNSIDES TO BEING A CAT.

By Christopher Hitchens

I HAVE A SMALL wish of my own in this season of public and private Utopias. It is that the emergence—or should I say ascendance?—of Barack Hussein Obama will allow the reentry into circulation of an old linguistic coinage. Exploited perhaps to greatest effect by James Baldwin, the word I have in mind is *cat*. Some of you will be old enough to remember it in real time, before the lugubrious and nerve-racking days when people never knew from one moment to the next what expression would put them in the wrong: the days of *Negro* and *colored* and *black* and *African American* and *people of color*. After all of this strenuous and heated and boring discourse, does not the very mien of our new president suggest something lithe and laid-back, agile but rested, cool but not *too* cool? A “cat” also, in jazz vernacular, can be a white person, just as Obama, in some

non-*Plessy v. Ferguson* ways, can be. I think it might be rather nice to have a feline for president, even if only after enduring so many dogs. (Think, for one thing, of the kitten-like grace of those daughters.) The metaphor also puts us in mind of a useful cliché, which is that cats have nine lives—and an ability to land noiselessly and painlessly on their feet.

Toward the beginning of his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama displays the modesty that is one of his many engaging qualities, attributing his victory in his very first U.S. Senate race (all the way back in 2004) to “my almost spooky good fortune.” This understates matters to a huge degree. The front-runner in the original contest for the

Democratic nomination in that race, a man named Blair Hull, who had spent \$28.7 million of his own money, was hit by news reports that his second wife

had sought a protection order during an ugly divorce some years before. Not only did his commanding lead in the polls evaporate, but he had already lost the advice and services of the gifted political consultant David Axelrod, who joined the Obama camp. Meanwhile, the Republican primary had resulted in a victory for the personable Jack Ryan, whose early campaign showed distinct promise. Ryan was also to be unhorsed by earlier divorce accusations from

his former wife, the actress Jeri Ryan, who accused the GOP standard-bearer of forcing her to go to S&M clubs and

DREAMS FROM MY FATHER

Barack Obama

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THE CASE AGAINST BARACK OBAMA

David Freddoso

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have sex in public. (You know how that upsets the family-values constituency.) Obligated to find another candidate at short notice, the Illinois GOP made the appalling and condescending mistake of selecting Alan Keyes, a highly volatile and extremely right-wing black man who had run for office almost everywhere *but* Illinois, and who promptly decided to accuse Obama of being insufficiently African American because none of his ancestors had been slaves! In the course of the campaign, for good measure, Obama was chosen to give the keynote address at the Democratic convention, with, as he sweetly phrases it, “seventeen minutes of unfiltered, uninterrupted air-time on national television.”

Nor does this exhaust the story of his luck—the quality that, you will remember, was considered by Napoleon to be the most essential ingredient of good generalship. Hillary Clinton, when seeking an avenue back into national politics, might have tried to return by way of her native Illinois. But that eventuality was precluded by the offer, from a senior member of the Black Caucus, of an uncontested nomination in New York. John Edwards’s marital difficulties might have come to light a little earlier, but as it happened, he stayed in the 2008 race long enough to beat Clinton into third place in the Iowa caucuses, thus dealing a blow to her campaign from which it, and she, never entirely recovered. Finally, it was hard to avoid the suspicion, in the closing weeks of last October, that several of McCain’s advisers must at the very least have been subconsciously working for an Obama victory. On the right, where febrile talk of Obama’s “Marxism” is still to be heard, the rage and frustration reminds me of the way some on the left used to talk about Ronald Reagan in the age of “Teflon”: a politician seemingly immune from consequences and benefiting even from his own mistakes. (The locus classicus here would be the now-famous Philadelphia address on race and racism, which allowed Obama to turn the dross of his connection with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright into the gold of “the healing process.”)

Our new president’s charm is not merely superficial. It is compounded of two qualities that are distinctly rare

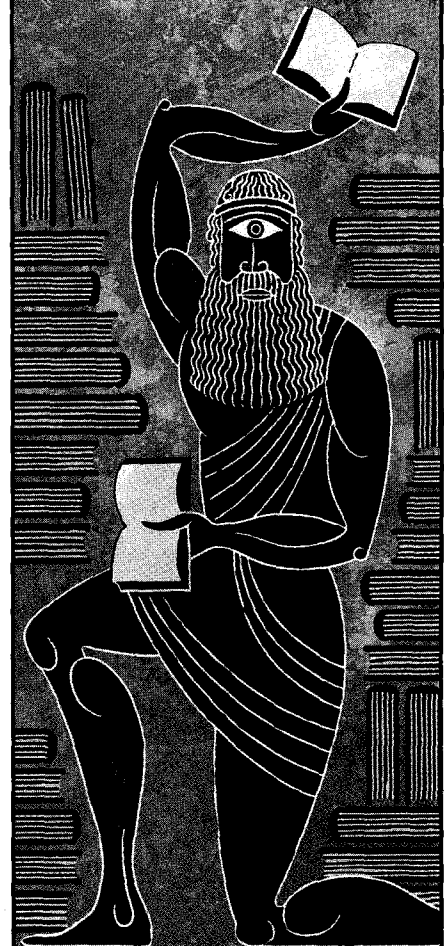
in the political class: an apparently very deep internal equanimity, and an ability to employ irony at his own expense. Obama, one can tell, would not have been devastated if he had lost the contest for the White House. Nor was he ready to do or say absolutely anything to win it. In fact, I am convinced that he did not at first expect to win this time around (otherwise, as Jeremiah Wright himself once admitted, he would have taken his distance from that South Side church as a prophylactic measure rather than a reactive or improvised one).

Should you desire to sample the combination of personal qualities I have just mentioned, read Obama’s account, in *Dreams From My Father*, of his exchanges with his black teenage friend Ray while at prep school in Hawaii:

Our rage at the white world needed no object, he seemed to be telling me, no independent confirmation; it could be switched on and off at our pleasure ... We weren’t living in the Jim Crow South, I would remind him. We weren’t consigned to some heatless housing project in Harlem or the Bronx. We were in goddamned Hawaii. We said what we pleased; ate where we pleased: we sat at the front of the proverbial bus. None of our white friends ... treated us any differently than they treated each other. They loved us, and we loved them back. Shit, seemed like half of ‘em wanted to be black themselves ... Well, that’s true, Ray would admit. Maybe we could afford to give the bad-assed nigger pose a rest. Save it for when we really needed it.

It’s this same catlike lightness and gentle raillery that I believe communicated itself subliminally to many white and brown and Jewish voters, and even to those like myself who detest the idea of voting with the epidermis. It certainly leaves a man like David Freddoso repeatedly punching the air. His book, which I hope he won’t mind if I describe as surprisingly good-tempered and measured (he did begin as a colleague of Ann Coulter’s at *Human Events*), has the fairly easy task of showing that Obama comes from a far more “left” milieu than any Democratic nominee before him. I believe I could prove this by my own unaided efforts: when *Newsweek*’s

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Jon Meacham asked both presidential candidates for a sample of their reading matter, he got back a fairly strong list from each. Obama gave John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* where someone else might have been content to put *The Grapes of Wrath*. Whereas the latter is about suffering and stoicism, the former is about how the field hands finally rebel, and how the "organizer" helps them to do so. I would have noticed this even had I not dined a few times in the Hyde Park district of Chicago, and briefly met William Ayers and known others of that set. And, though it is true that Obama has no memory of 1968 and the "Days of Rage," if only because he was 7, the turning of Grant Park into a sort of "people's park" on the night of his election brought a smile to more than one set of grizzled old cheeks, and contributed to the numinous and refulgent effect in which everything seemed briefly bathed. Forgotten was the association of the word *Chicago* with the terms *machine* and *South Side*, two cognates that are in point of fact just as relevant as the cynical Rahm Emanuel to the start of Obama's trajectory.

Freddoso performs nobly by supplying a thesaurus of near-incredible citations of uncritical if not servile drool that, alas, I can confirm were indeed uttered by senior members of my profession. He is fair, if tight-lipped, in adding a number of testimonies from the right—thus anticipating the famous "Obamacon" defectors, from Peggy Noonan to Christopher Buckley, who were such a feature of the post-convention (i.e., post-Palin nomination) months of the campaign. But eventually he concedes, and bows to Obama's sheer luck, and even succumbs somewhat to his charm, and avers several times that no, of course Obama's not a Marxist or a terrorist sympathizer or anything of the sort. This more or less seems to license the conclusion that we have nothing to fear from Obama but Obama himself.

If you are looking for troubling flaws in the new hero, you will find them in the accounts of his editorship at the *Harvard Law Review*, where he won golden opinions for soliciting and publishing every view but his own. It may be true that, according to Freddoso, Obama dismissed the slogan "Yes we can" as "vapid and mindless" when it was first

proposed to him, in 2004, but he liked it well enough in 2008, and then came the null emptiness of the phrase—the *audacity of hope*—that he annexed from a windy sermon by Jeremiah Wright. Or you may have already begun to have your fill of verbiage like this, taken from the best seller of that name:

No, what's troubling is the gap between the magnitude of our challenges and the smallness of our politics—the ease with which we are distracted by the petty and trivial, our chronic avoidance of tough decisions, our seeming inability to build a working consensus to tackle any big problem.

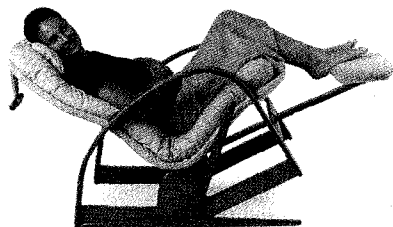
No consensus on making tough decisions! This is not even trying to have things both ways; it's more like having things no way. It puts me in mind of the utter fatuity of Obama's speech in Berlin, where he attributed the fall of the wall to the power of "a world that stands as one"—a phrase that stands no test. Or even worse, in his scant pages dealing with Iraq (a country we would have abandoned in 2006 if he had had his way): "When battle-hardened Marine officers suggest we pull out and skeptical foreign correspondents suggest that we stay, there are ..." (close your eyes and guess what's coming) "no easy answers to be had." To some questions, there may not even be any *difficult* answers. The very morning after the U.S. election, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev threatened to redeploy and retarget Russian short-range missiles against Poland; as recently as 2005, Obama and his Senate colleague Dick Lugar had contentedly watched as Russian long-range missiles were being stood down. Something more than luck will be required here.

It was, I think, Lloyd George who said of Lord Derby that, like a cushion, he bore the imprint of whoever had last sat upon him. Though Obama, too, has the dubious gift of being many things to many people, the difficulty with him is almost the opposite: he treads so lightly and deftly that all the impressions he has so far made are alarmingly slight. Perhaps this is the predictable downside of being a cat. **A**

Christopher Hitchens is an Atlantic contributing editor and a Vanity Fair columnist.

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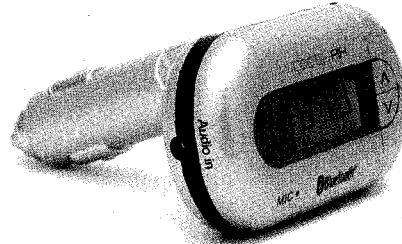
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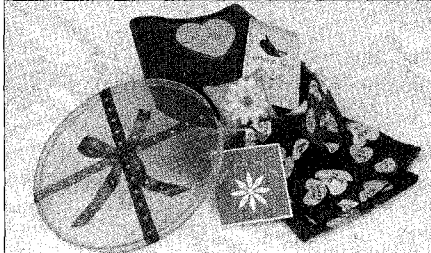
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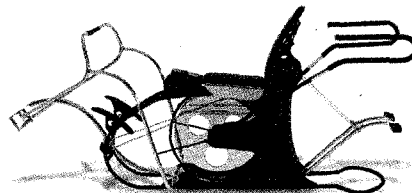
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IN A WORD

By Barbara Wallraff

IF A FIGHT broke out between the “Get a life!” brigade and the “Gotcha!” gang, who do you suppose would win? I know both groups well—so I try to keep them apart.

Both are looking for trouble. The “Get a life” people spend their free time trawling the Internet, searching for material they’re not interested in so that they can leave comments like “There is really nothing like arguing about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.” (That one showed up on my blog.)

The “Gotcha” folks, meanwhile, are on the prowl for anyone who talks funny. For instance, a few days after the election, while everybody else was still jubilant or depressed, a reader e-mailed me to say that she had only one criticism of President-elect Obama—that he sometimes misused personal pronouns, as in “President Bush graciously invited Michelle and I to meet with him ...” Even as I thought, *What’s the matter with you? Compared with Bush, Barack Obama is Winston Churchill, William Jennings Bryan, and Cicero rolled into one*, I wanted to protect my correspondent from people who would actually come out and say that. After all, she had a valid point. I let fresh e-mail pile up on top of hers until it sank into the deep.

Knowing how to respond to certain other “Gotcha” readers is still harder. They see a newspaper headline like “Three Troops Killed in Afghanistan” and sit down to write me about the unfortunate use of the word *troops*. I know, I know—a *troop* is preferably a group. But that can’t really be anyone’s whole reaction to such a news story. Step back.

The “Get a life” need to step back too. Everything we think about is less important than something else we could be thinking about. In the wrong context, any subject can seem petty. Connoisseurship is a good thing



nevertheless. It’s a hallmark of civilization. We have time and energy to take an interest in niceties *because* we’re not ordinarily occupied with momentous things like death or even the transfer of executive power.

God bless fine points, then. Let’s just try to keep them compartmentalized in a safe place where they belong.

WORD FUGITIVES

RECENTLY, WE SOUGHT a word that would mean a kind of confusion that results from spending a lot of time at the computer—such that, for instance, a person who just knocked a jar off the counter might mentally reach for the Undo keyboard command.

Compulsion struck a number of readers as the obviously right coinage. Cen Zhang, of New York City, suggested *keyfuddled*; Katherine Brown, of Cincinnati, *keystroke of misfortune*; Rick Hickman, of Venice, Calif., *key-jerk reaction*; and Matthew Bersagel Braley, of Tucker, Ga., *typogrammatical error*.

Dennis O’Toole wrote, in a blog comment, “Since this covers humans

employing computer qualities in inappropriate situations, we should name it in tribute to the computer that developed human qualities in an inappropriate situation. The term is *HALaprops*.”

All good ideas, but taking top honors is Carl Kay, of Tokyo, who wrote, “Unfortunately, my diagnosis in this case is *inputtence*.”

NOW CAROLYN HAGGIS, of Oxford, England, writes, “I’m looking for a word for the items of clothing which sit perched on a chair in my bedroom, waiting to be reworn. They are not yet ready for the laundry bin (since I plan to rewear them), but they are no longer suitable for the wardrobe (which I reserve for clean clothes). I assume others keep their lightly worn clothes in a similar purgatory?” ■

Visit Barbara Wallraff’s blog, at barbarawallraff.theatlantic.com, to see more commentary on language and to submit Word Fugitive queries and words that meet Carolyn Haggis’s need. Readers whose queries are published and those who take top honors will receive an autographed copy of Wallraff’s most recent book, *Word Fugitives*.

PETER ARKLE

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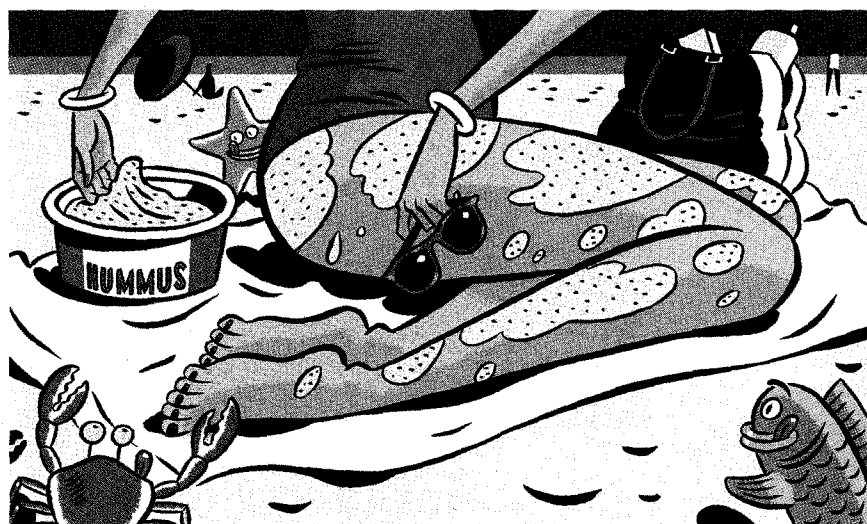
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WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

By Jeffrey Goldberg



I'm a vegan, which poses no problems except when I'm with my carnivorous family. I don't expect them to change the way they eat, but it is difficult to share meals both at home (it's insulting to them if I cook for myself, but they insist on buttering the vegetables) and out ("What's vegan?"). My mother gets annoyed that I don't partake in traditional activities like making s'mores. I've tried cooking for my parents, but they don't like anything I make and resent my "preaching" to my siblings. How do I meld these two lifestyles?

Beth Smith, Dallas, Texas

Dear Beth,
First, nobody likes a hectoring vegan. Unassuming vegans are fine. Your parents undoubtedly love you, but don't test the proposition. They already accept your dissidence, and this is what counts. So, none of that veganish whinging—you know, the "Oh, God, put away the cottage cheese before the Auschwitz-like cruelty of modern dairy farming makes me throw up in disgust" sort of whinging. Bring food home with you, if you must, and live by example, not rhetoric. You'll gain more converts that way. Another way to gain converts would be to introduce your family to vegan marshmallows, which would let bloom a renewed spirit of togetherness on your family s'mores-making nights.

And I happen to know a great recipe for Mexican s'mores, or "s'macos," so you can get started: you'll need one package of tortillas, a bag of carob chips, one bag of vegan marshmallows, and a jar of peanut butter. Spread the peanut butter on the tortillas, then add in the carob chips and marshmallows. Roll up the tortillas, wrap them in foil, and stick them in the fire for three or four minutes. Delicious.

What damage can the sun do to the naked skin of women? Why are men more resistant to this radiation?

Mamoun Ello, Aleppo, Syria

Dear Mamoun,
I got a terrible sunburn in Damascus once, and because I did not know the Arabic word for *calamine*, I treated my burn with a substance that I now believe was hummus. Which brings me to a point about male ignorance: it is a myth that women burn more easily than men—in fact, studies have shown that the opposite is true; men burn more frequently because they are more negligent about applying sunscreen. A sunscreen that will leave both male and female skin undamaged is the very French La Roche-Posay Anthelios XL Lait, SPF 50. It contains ecamsule, which is very effective against short UVA rays.

We recently hosted a brunch for a friend, who kindly brought a straw-

berry shortcake. But as I put the cake out on the table, I noticed mold nestled between the strawberries and the cake. The conundrum: Point out the mold, at risk of humiliating the guest of honor? Or say nothing, and risk poisoning everyone?

Joy Pueschel, Chevy Chase, Md.

Dear Joy,
You should not poison your guests, unless this is your actual goal, in which case I would suggest a truly malevolent mold like aflatoxin. Whether or not murder is the goal, it is unacceptable to humiliate your guest by noting the parlous state of the strawberry shortcake. Might I suggest getting a dog? A dog would have served you quite usefully in this moment. Imagine the shortcake positioned at the edge of a counter; a quick swipe of an overenthusiastic dog's tail would solve your problem. And no harm comes to the dog because dogs are unembarrassable. Have you ever tried to embarrass a dog?

I am a gay man serving in the U.S. Army. I often see Joshua Green of The Atlantic as a commentator on various news broadcasts. Josh is really adorable (and smart, too). I especially like his long eyelashes. How can I get a date with him?

Captain Mark, address withheld

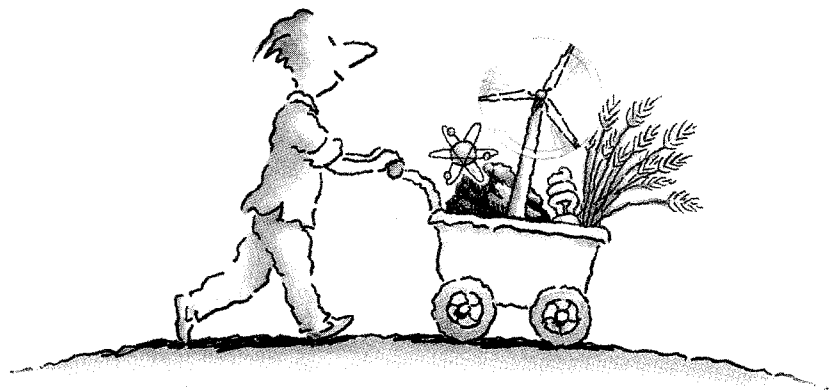
Dear Captain Mark,
I'm sorry to report that although my colleague Joshua Green does indeed have long eyelashes, he is not, in fact, gay. Furthermore, our mutual colleague Andrew Sullivan, who is quite gay, informs me that if Joshua, who is in his mid-30s, is not gay by now, he probably never will be. But if you're to have any chance at all, may I suggest leaking him documents from the ill-starred Hillary Clinton presidential campaign, or perhaps copies of Barack Obama's secret BlackBerry messages? He might go for that. ■

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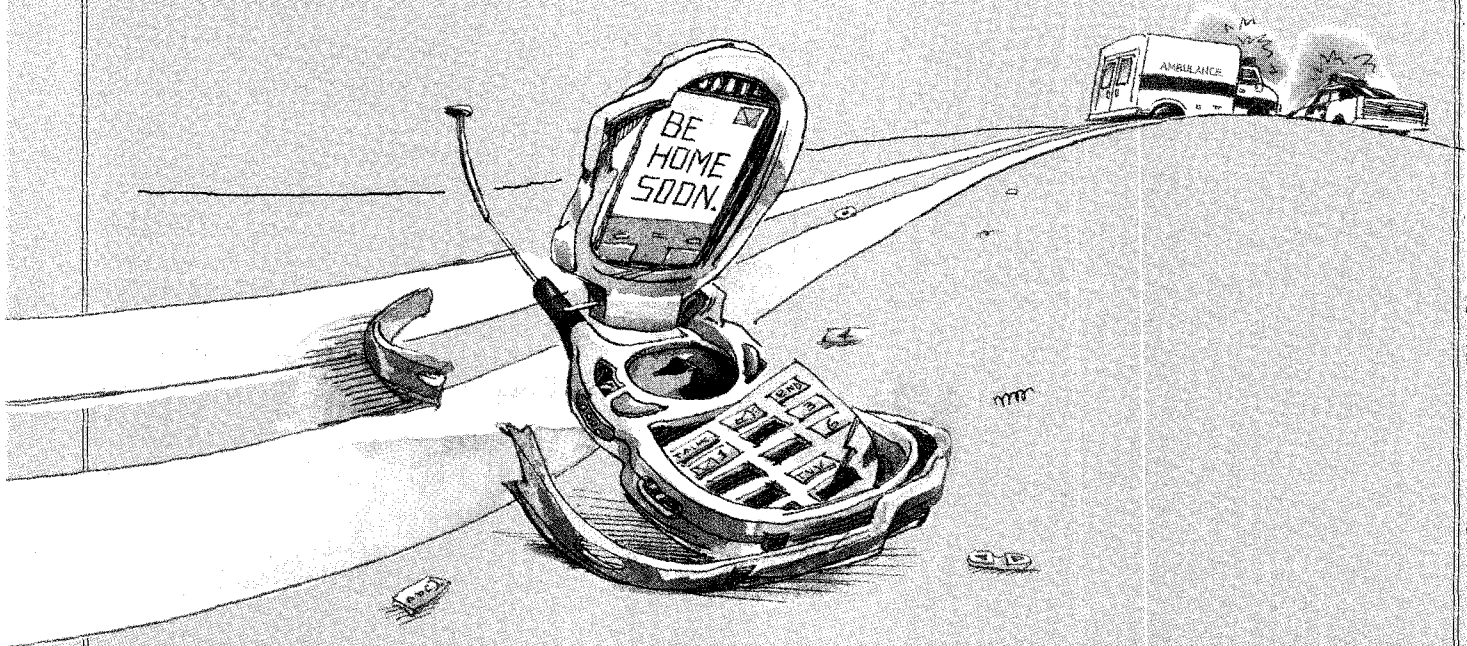
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